STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

MAGAZINE • FEB. 17th, 1940

10 CENTS

FEB. 17, '40

SKULL VALLEY GOLD

A Book-length Novel

By TOM ROAN

10 TO 25 LBS., NEW PEP GAINED QUICK WITH IRONIZED YEAST TABLETS

IT used to be thought that many people were just naturally skinny, puny and inclined to be nervous. But today that idea has been proved entirely untrue in great numbers of cases. Thousands of thin, tired, jittery, rundown people have gained new naturally good-looking pounds, normal health and pep, new friends and wonderful new enjoyment in life—with the aid of the Vitamin B and iron in these amazing little Ironized Yeast tablets.

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY 17, 1940 VOL. CLXXX NO. 3

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

SKULL VALLEY GOLD . . . . . **Tom Roan** 9
Gold and guns generally go together, Sam Martin had discovered—but he had had his fill of both even before he came to the Death Head. . . .

A SERIAL

GHOSTS OF THE RIMROCK . . . . . **Harry Sinclair Drago** . . 101
Second of Five Parts
With a posse scouring the rimrock, would Jim Morningstar ever be able to convince his captors that he had not double-crossed them?

SHORT STORIES

CACTUS BRANDED . . . . . **Harry F. Olmsted** . . . 51
To sky pilot a town like Gunsight Gap, a man had to be ready to preach a six-gun sermon—when words weren't strong enough. . . .

HIGH LOW TAKES THE DEAL . . . . . **Mojave Lloyd** 64
High Low was playing for mighty steep stakes—even though he didn't have a hand in that poker game!

TOP HAND . . . . . **Von Cort** 74
Not until the man who called himself "Joe" licked his past did it look as though he'd have a future. . . .

PHANTOM OF THE GEE POLE . . . . . **Kenneth Gilbert** 84
The Siwash Kid had a hunch some unseen driver was guiding the gee pole of that mystery sled!

WESTERN STORY FEATURE

THE STORY OF THE WEST . . . . . **Gerard Delano** 62
Episode XCIII in the making of the cattle country. . . .

DEPARTMENTS

THE ROUNDUP . . . . . **The Editor** 5
GUNS AND GUNNERS . . . . . **Phil Sharpe** 93
MINES AND MINING . . . . . **John A. Thompson** . . . 95
THE HOLLOW TREE . . . . . **Helen Rivers** 97
WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE . **John North** 99

COVER BY DAVID BERGER

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The Roundup

SEVERAL weeks ago we promised to let you in on friend L. L. Foreman's strange and awful predicament. At that time space forbade going into details, but we reprint herewith in full L. L.'s letter, which we think should have the handle, THE GREAT PARROT FEATHERS DILEMMA:

You see, it was like this: Late one night, while I was camped up in the Cebolla Valley this last summer, Pablo and Felipe appeared from nowhere in the darkness and introduced themselves. That is, Pablo did the introducing. He'd been to school and spoke pretty good English. Felipe, a tall and lean splinter, still wore his red hair band, tribal knot and moccasins, and had had no truck with such educational superfluities.

Well, as you may remember, I'd arranged to buy a piece of that valley for a homesite, so I aimed to start right and get in good with my neighbors. So I played the gracious host to Pablo Yepa and Felipe Waquiu. They'd come up from the pueblo, forty-odd miles down the mountains, for a look-see around. They had a few muskmelons with them to sell, but that was just a fairish good excuse for the jaunt.

So I bought two muskmelons I didn't want. Pablo then got to the core of the matter and said they'd like to make camp around there for the night. I offered them the whole valley and a flashlight, and showed them the woodpile. Pablo then mentioned he'd like to buy a little coffee and stuff from me. Needed to borrow a coffeepot, too. My wife was with me. She and I dug up the makings for a meal, and I went through the grand gesture of refusing Pablo's money. Later I wandered over to their fire, and we jawed and smoked my tobacco till all hours.

Next morning Pablo invited us to the first harvest dance at the pueblo, which it seemed was due in a couple of days. We accepted, and they departed.

We went. Well, sir, their hospitality would have made a high target for a Southerner to shoot at. We were guests of Pablo and his wife, of his family and relatives, of Felipe and his wife, and more relatives, and we ate lunch in Pablo's house—tortillas, a red-peppered soup guaranteed to kill and cremate all germs, coffee and watermelon. Very nice house, too. Dobe, of course, and it had a dobe fireplace that I greatly admired. Pablo said he'd build one like it for me, whenever I got my house up.

We had a grandstand seat at the dance, on one of the flat rooftops overlooking the plaza. No other whites were there, and Pablo advised me strongly not to try taking any pictures of the dancing. The crowd was all Indian, squatting on rooftops and around the plaza, the women shading from the sun under their best and brightest shawls, the men keeping aloof from them, and the kids not wearing much of anything.

You know, there's something to that Indian dancing. At first it seems monotonous. The long line of dancers, with their huge and elaborate headdresses, keep up a steady shuffle and stamp to the boom of the drums and rattle of gourds. They've been dancing that way for hundreds of years, since long before the coming of the Spaniards, and they've got the thing down pretty pat by now. They wear fox skins for tails, and fir boughs for girdles and shoulder shawls, along with strings of strung corn and shell

anklets. Soon the steady rhythm of the beat gets into you. You notice that once in a while, with no apparent signal, the beat changes subtly without a false step on the part of a single dancer. You begin tapping to the time and trying to predict the next change. By then you're practically an Indian and you want to get down there and join in the stompin' and the *ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ing*.

I took particular notice of the headdresses. All were different in minor details, but all followed the same pattern. And now I come to the parrot feathers. Hang on, if you're still with me.

In those headdresses were all kinds of feathers, as well as other ornaments and symbolical regalia. Hawk feathers, eagle feathers, wild-turkey feathers. And every one of 'em had a fan-shaped spray of colored feathers, mostly bright green. So I asked another question of the patient and long-suffering Pablo.

"Those," said I, "look like parrot feathers. Pretty hard to get in this country, aren't they?"

He nodded. "Yes. Very hard. No parrots here." This was his chance to return one of my compliments. I'd been boosting New Mexico to the limit, not saying a thing about Florida, where I happen to have my present home. Pablo remarked politely, "You have parrots in Florida?"

Now, there are a lot of reasons why a man will lie, and not all of them are sinister. Understand, Pablo wanted to find something nice to say about the country I was from, inasmuch as I'd pranced so gay about his house, his children, his pueblo, and covered all of New Mexico with a layer of praise. At least, that was my impression. I couldn't deny him the satisfaction of reciprocal courtesy.

"Uh—yes," I answered, thinking of the pet shops, while my chronically truthful wife sent me the discouraged look of a padre watching his prize convert loot the mission altar. "Yeah, there are parrots in Florida."

"Nice," he murmured, and I forgot about it. But he was evidently conjuring up visions of a land where swarms of parrots flew squawking through the trees to light all around me as I sat sipping a julep or something. He touched my arm.

"When you come back," he said, quiet rapture in his eyes, "you will bring me parrot feathers from Florida, yes?"

What could I say? Furthermore, when we left, he loaded us with green corn and melons. I had previously mentioned that I wanted to buy a painted Laguna olla as a gift for a friend. Turned out Pablo's wife was a Laguna Indian, and she had several beauties. They made me set my own price on the biggest one, then cut my bid to half and refused to take a cent more.

So here I am back in Florida, and I've got till spring to collect, somehow or other, a nice big bunch of parrot feathers. I'm considering the idea of canvassing the pet shops up and down the State and persuading them to send me prompt word when their parrots start molting, so that I can make the rounds with a broom, dust pan, and some crackers. If you can better that idea, I'd appreciate it.

Sounds like L. L. is open to suggestions. Step up, gentle readers, and help an hombre out of a tight!

In Western Story next week—

Walt Coburn heads the list with a novel that blazes and crackles with dramatic action—REPPING FOR SATAN. You're sure to get a thrill out of watching a fighting Texican, trailing a quartet of cold-blooded murderers, take time off to topple the rawhide crown from the head of the Cattle King of the Canadian.

Out in the wide-open spaces, they handle a kidnaper, not with ransom, but with smoking six-guns, so when Paddy Gleason saw someone dabbing a loop on the Millionaire Kid, he hit the trail with the speed of greased lightning. See if you can keep up with him in FORGE OF VENGEANCE, a short story by E. C. Lincoln.

Frank Richardson Pierce, Hal C. Firanze, S. Omar Barker, John Colohan, Harry Sinclair Drago and many other top hands will also be gathered around the campfire next week—won't you join 'em?

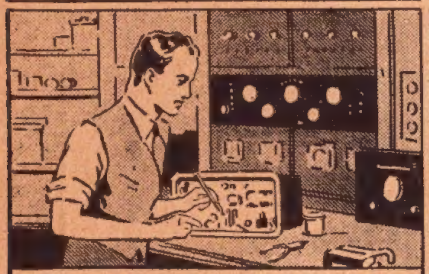
I jumped from $18 a week to $50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S *How it Happened*

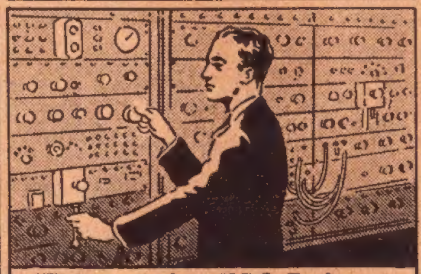
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."

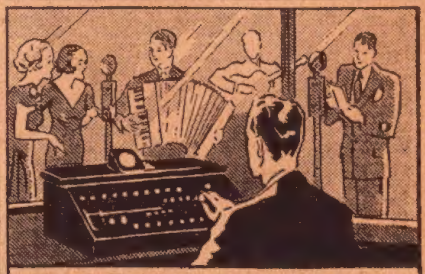
"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast."

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years

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Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, Commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N.R.I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

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Washington, D. C.

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS INCORPORATED

INTER OFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: Mr. A. L. Grammer, President FROM F. L. Stebbins, Jr. DATE February 1, 1940

SUBJECT:

Mighty glad to tell you that "Steel to the Sunset", now appearing in the February 10th issue of WILD WEST WEEKLY stands out, in my opinion, as "tops" among all stories that I have read for publication.

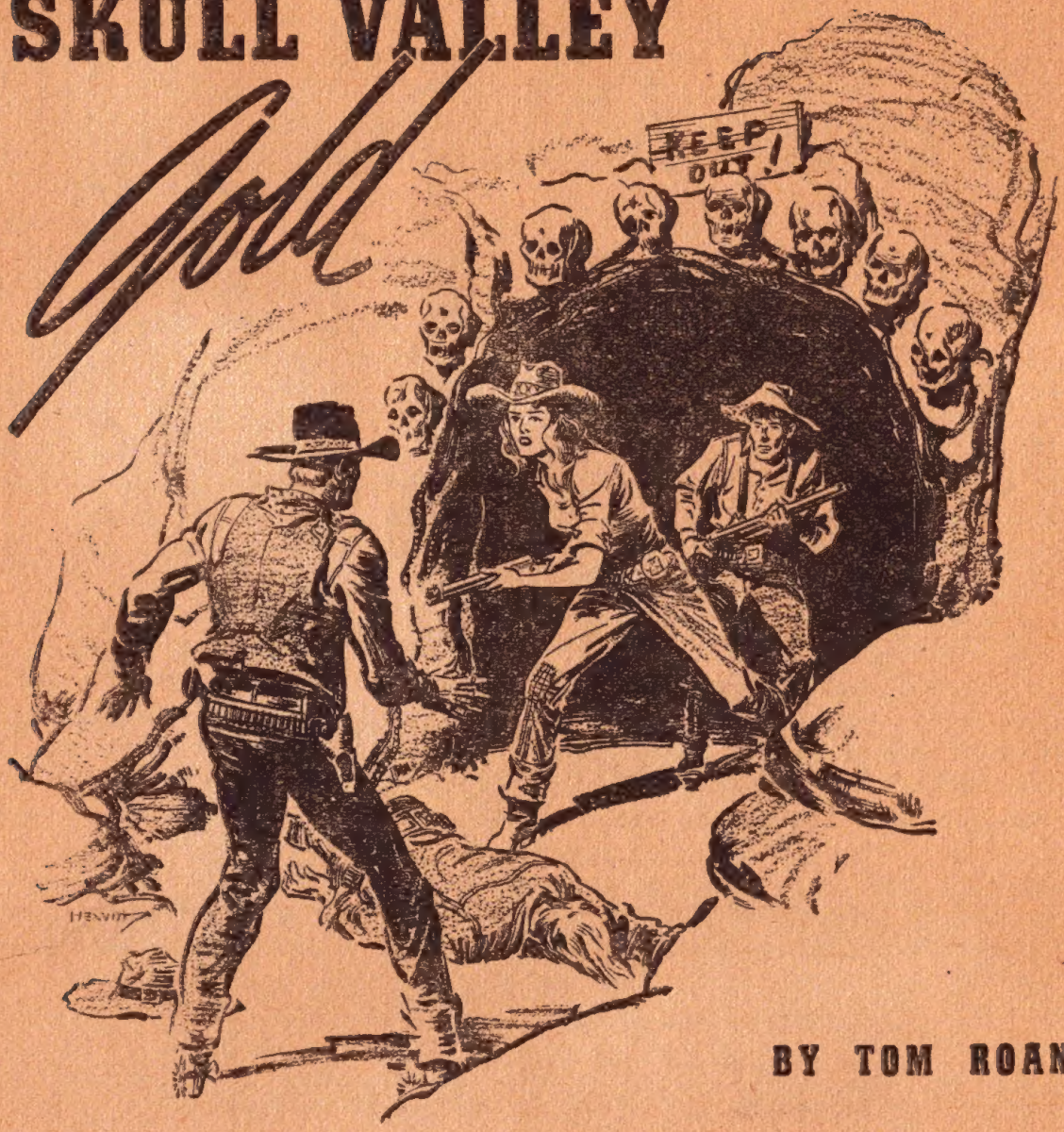
This story was written especially for WILD WEST WEEKLY by Allan R. Bosworth, who is rated by countless readers as the outstanding Western writer of today. Within the past few months Bosworth has had stories in THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, COLLIER'S and THIS WEEK. In a highly dramatic piece of writing Mr. Bosworth paints the conflict of two great railroads in their race westward to reach the Colorado border and acquire valuable Federal land grants.

Real drama, man-to-man conflict, interesting characterization, plot and color - this story has everything. I'm sure that many who are not now reading WILD WEST WEEKLY would like to know about this splendid story.

F. L. Stebbins, Jr.
Editor, WILD WEST WEEKLY

A real treat for new and old readers of WILD WEST WEEKLY.

SKULL VALLEY Gold



BY TOM ROAN

CHAPTER I

LEAD WELCOME

THE sound of the shot, coming with such terribly unexpected swiftness, was like a wail from hell. The report came crashing down the high-walled mountains at either side of the narrow gorge. It was a ringing, echoing and re-echoing splatter of sound, magnifying itself a dozen times. It swept on, beating back and forth against the dark clouds of heavy timber at either side of the gorge until, at last, it disappeared in a chuckling evil murmur, to return no more.

Sam Martin had never heard such a fiendish echoing in all his eight weeks of rambling up and down the mysterious California-Nevada Sierras. The sound had been like the slow crashing of a score of rifles. When it came again, punctuated this time with the dull, desperate drumming of a pair of .45s, it was like an avalanche of thunder, let loose up and down the gorge.

After that the silence was so intense it was painful. Still Martin saw nothing. Still the scene was dominated by the blazing noonday sun overhead and a flashing white streak that was a roaring river a mile below the dangerous ledge trail he was following with his tall black horse trailing behind him for safety's sake.

Men were somewhere ahead; that was a certainty. The reports of the shots were the first man-made sounds Martin had heard in a week. He had been following the faint hint of a trail that led ever upward, first through the heavy timber below, then through thickets of manzanita, then scrub oak, buckbrush, and at last the bare face of the western wall of the gorge itself.

The going was growing more dangerous at each step of the way. A dozen times Martin would have turned back, but the ledge had become so narrow it was impossible for him to turn the horse on it. Now Martin and the horse stood there, both listening. From the distance they must have looked like a pair of black ants perched high on a shelf of blue-gray rock above the river. The horse snorted, more aware of danger ahead than the ever-present possibility of a slip of a hoof that would send him cartwheeling and smashing to death on the rocks in the water thousands of feet below.

Martin had stiffened. An awareness of danger prickled him from the ends of his toes to the top of his head. His hands had slipped quickly to the butts of the old black .45s at his hips. A quiet man, not given easily to alarm, his lips had tightened and his long lean face had become a grim mask of unpleasant expectation.

Up here in this vast mountain wilderness of the Devil Wind Drums, anything could happen to a man. In the old days it had been known as a sanctuary for outlaws of the gold trails; a haven for killers, army deserters and all-around bad men of every stripe, breed and caliber. It was a wild land still, ventured into by only a few, most of whom turned back to civilization before they had gone too far.

It would have been a nightmare country to some people. To Sam Martin it held the prospect of a haven. For weeks he had been working his way into it, a man shunning all signs of civilization. He wanted quiet, a place where he could escape the outside world.

For Sam Martin had told himself a thousand times and more that he was through with all of it. Five years of a rousing sheep and cattle war on his father's range lands in northern Idaho had made him feel that way. He was still young, not yet twenty-eight, but he had seen his share of blood. Twice in those five years of war he had found himself outlawed. Old Fighting Frank Martin had been a hard man to stop until a sheepman's rifle bullet brought him down and the law stepped in over his grave to take the rest of his range lands and cattle. Fighting Frank had leaned too strongly on the business methods of a good pair of .45s. He had fought back when government hide-binders had seized half his fine range lands to turn them over to bands of sheep whose Winchestered Basque herders could scarcely speak a word of English.

BUT Sam Martin did not want to think about that now. He was in a new land, far away from all old sores. He moved on. There was still no way to turn back, no

way for him to change his course. Whatever lay ahead was something he had to face, good or bad, dangerous or not.

After ten minutes more of winding and twisting along the ledge, he came to a V-shaped crack where a broader hint of the trail suddenly appeared, turning him and the horse from their perilous walkway and right into the cliffs themselves.

Once before he had thought he caught a faint odor of gun smoke. He had dismissed it as a figment of imagination, but now it was clear. The shots had not been far away from him. He could tell that the moment he entered the crack in the cliffs. There was smoke ahead of him, and there was no mistaking the acrid bite and smell of burned gunpowder. A thin, gauzelike cloud of it hung weaving upward in the breathless air, and just as he rounded a bend, with barren rocks towering up at either side of him, he came to a sudden halt.

The figure of a man lay ahead of him. It was that of a short, gray-bearded, ghostly thin man of sixty-odd, dressed in the ragged gray garb of a cowpuncher. He lay face downward on a pile of shale with the butts of a pair of yet-warm six-shooters clutched in his work-gnarled hands.

Martin moved forward quickly now, and halted at the man's feet. There was blood splattered on the rocks at either side. A glance was enough to indicate that it was foul play, but there was something else that caught Martin's staring blue eyes and brought a grunt of surprise from him.

Thirty feet ahead of the man who had been shot was a sight one might have expected to see somewhere on a cannibal island, but certainly not here in the Sierras. The rocks widened away and rounded together as if to form the insides of a deep, cone-shaped bowl. At the far side of the bowl was a round, dead-black opening in the rocks that looked like the mouth of a huge den. But that was not the sight that had stunned Martin. It was the things strung like a necklace around the hole—a necklace of human skulls forming a circle almost large enough for a man on horseback to ride through without bending his head. In the center of each forehead was a bullet hole, and above hung a cracked board. Across it, scrawled in black paint, was a warning that read:

KEEP OUT!

Martin rubbed his eyes and shook his head. He stared again. It was unbelievable. Without the man at his feet and the splatters of blood on the rocks, he would have thought it somebody's devilish idea of a joke. He might have kept on staring, but a low moan caused him to glance downward and move forward a pace to drop to one knee beside the man. He was just in the act of turning the old man over on his back when a quick, sharp voice halted him.

"Don't you dare put your hand on him! And don't reach for a gun! I have you covered with a Winchester—and I can shoot as well as any man!"

The unbelievable was happening again. Martin glanced up and found the muzzle of a rifle staring back at him, thrust out of the darkness of the hole inside the ring of skulls. He caught a glimpse of a pale face behind the sights of the rifle, and then a girl came forward, moving slowly—a tall, slenderly graceful girl with long, gleaming yellow hair and blazing blue eyes that

carried the sentence of doom in their fiery depths.

"You've killed Grandpa Johnny Joy!" she cried accusingly, the muzzle of the rifle still centered on Martin's forehead, and those blazing blue eyes sparkling their frantic lights of danger down the shining barrel. "Now I'm going to kill you!"

CHAPTER II

THE STRANGER DRAWS BLOOD

SHE was a pretty girl in spite of her shabby, patched gray corduroy trousers, run-over boots, and a boyish shirt turned a faded yellow from many washings. A battered black hat that must once have belonged to a man sat on the back of her curly head. She wore a wide, silver-buckled cartridge belt, and even that was old, sagging away at her right hip where a long, black six-shooter hung within easy reach.

Martin started to stand up. The muzzle of the rifle and a tightening on the trigger drove him back. He lifted his hands immediately, realizing that his position here was a precarious one. He was not facing a girl who was merely angry. He was facing one who was grief-stricken at the sight of the man lying there so loosely on the shale. Martin opened his mouth to speak, but she silenced him with a quick sob instead of words.

"Wait a minute, Linda Lou! Let's hear him sing a little before we shoot."

The voice came from behind the girl. It was high-pitched and cracked. Martin expected to see some old man come darting out of the skull-ringed mouth of the hole. Instead, there suddenly appeared a red-headed, freckle-faced boy of about thirteen. Gangling, buck-toothed, he seemed to run all to hands and feet, and he was dressed as if in the cast-off rags and battered chaps of some cowpuncher. In his hands was a double-barreled shotgun, its two big bores of a muzzle covering Martin.

"I said wait, Linda Lou." The boy was beside the girl with a few leaps that showed him as agile as a mountain goat in spite of his big-booted and rusty-spurred feet. He lifted his left hand, quickly throwing up the girl's rifle. "Killin' is a man's job. Gran'pa Johnny promised me I could kill the next one, an' I've got my old Salivation Sal loaded with buckshot to do the job!"

"Now that's better!" exclaimed Martin, feeling sudden relief come over him and straightening slowly with his hands still thrust well above his head. "That's a whole lot better! I didn't shoot your grandpa, sonny. I—"

"Don't 'sonny' me!" snarled the boy, and the hand that had thrown up the girls' rifle was quickly flying back to the shotgun. "I ain't no kid, if that's what yo're tryin' to make me out. I'm a man, I am. I'm a Joy, an' Joys grow up quick. Me an' Linda Lou heard the shots an'—"

"And I know who you are!" shot in the girl, still eying Martin fiercely. "You're Broad Buckhalter's brother! You're Gale Buckhalter—from Wyoming! The Buckhalter crowd's expecting you. I heard them talking when they didn't know there was a Joy within a mile of them. You—"

"Now wait a minute!" cut in Martin, beginning to lose his temper. "I don't know what you're talking about. I know that my name is not Gale Buckhalter, and I know that I didn't shoot this man here on the ground. I'm a stranger in these hills—"

"Strangers," put in the boy with

his cocksure arrogance, "don't often come into these hills, mister!"

"—and I don't know what this trouble's all about," Martin went on doggedly. "I heard shooting. I came on, leading my horse up the ledges, and found this man lying here. Just before you came, Miss Linda Lou"—he looked at the girl, straight into her eyes—"I heard him groan. I was going to turn him over to see what I could do for him when you popped into the picture and covered me with your rifle. If you'll put down that gun, I might still be able to do something for the man."

"Gran'pa Johnny Joy ain't dead!" Martin saw the boy's eyes widen and the muzzle of the old shotgun start to reluctantly lower. "Are yuh sure?"

"Just stay where you are," ordered Martin, again easing back to one knee beside the man on the rocks, "and I'll see. In the meanwhile, you can keep me covered if you like. If I make even one wrong move, you still have the drop on me."

IT was a chance for him to do something now. Martin rolled the man over on his back, and looked down into a face as wrinkled and browned by the sun as old leather. There was a groan, and a pair of greenish-gray eyes opened flutteringly, looking up at him with the old face twisting into a puzzled scowl. With a series of gasps, the man spoke.

"So yuh shot me—dry-gulched me, yuh snake, an' now yo're robbing me, huh?"

"Did you hear that!" cried the girl, stepping quickly to one side and swinging the butt of her rifle to her shoulder again. "Did you hear it, Trigger?"

"I heard it!" answered Martin, looking at the girl quickly. "He's not fully returned to consciousness yet. He doesn't know what he's saying. Give him a little time. I have a canteen of water on my saddle. I'll get it."

"No, you don't!" screeched the boy, whipping up the muzzle of his shotgun. "We'll shoot if yuh move!"

"Now look here!" Martin stood up, taking a dangerous chance in the face of the menace of the rifle and the shotgun. "You two are excited and can't think in a pinch. Don't act like a pair of scared fools! You can shoot me if you want to —and in the back at that!—but I'm going to get that water, and I'm going to use it to help your granddad."

He deliberately turned his back to them then, but he kept his hands lifted. It was only three paces back to his horse. He reached up, carefully took down his canteen without even glancing at the boy and the girl, and returned to the old man.

"I'll take a drink of it, if it ain't poisoned." To Martin's surprise, the old man had suddenly sat up. "I thought yuh was the fella that shot me, but I see yuh ain't. It was Sid Buckhalter what opened up on me from up there on top of the rocks. His first bullet knocked me down, but his rifle musta jammed on 'im. I had a chance to mix up a few shots with 'im with my short guns, an' I kind o' think I hit 'im once or twice. I ain't hurt much. Heck fire an' bullsnakes, fella, yuh can't kill a Joy as easy as a polecat! Who the devil are yuh, anyway?"

"I'm Sam Martin, if it means anything to you." Martin handed him the opened canteen. "Take yourself a drink. That's good water,

what there is left of it. I'm not in the habit of going around poisoning people."

A shot crashed above him at that instant. Martin flung backward and down to one knee. His guns were out of his holsters even as he was going down. He caught a glimpse of a black-bearded face above him, a face looking down the barrel of a rifle.

Without a thought of what the old man, the boy or the girl might do, Martin started shooting. There was a snarl on the rocks above him. A man staggered out on the edge of the bowllike pit. A rifle came clattering down. Martin drowned out the noise of it with another shot, and the loose figure of the man above him toppled forward.

The falling man was like a giant in the air. He came plunging down the steep slope, a bouncing, flapping figure that came to a halt in a grotesque bundle right under Martin's now snorting and lunging horse.

CHAPTER III

DEATH FOR A JOY

GRANDPA JOHNNY JOY was stumbling to his feet almost as soon as the plunging figure of the man from the rim came to a halt on the rocks. He looked older than sixty-odd now. He looked like some ancient monkey, a grinning, toothless old heller if Sam Martin had ever seen one—a man who would rather drink and fight than do anything else. With a few flips, he reloaded his .45s, then spilled a little water from the canteen on a bullet-washed tear in the scalp on top of his head. He clamped his hat on, and shook back his narrow shoulders.

"It was either him or me, Grandpa!" Martin had straightened and was reloading his six-shooters while he kept a close watch on the rim of the rocks above him. " 'Kill or get killed!'—as the old saying goes. Is that the man who shot you?"

"Sid Buckhalter, yeah," nodded the old man, shuffling forward to prod the downed man with the toe of his boot. "But he ain't near dead yet. All them Buckhalters are hard to kill. Just like the Joys. Some Joy in 'em, but they get their snake side from the ol' moonshinin', backin's drinkin' West Virginia Buckhalters. Bad as I hate to admit it, they're kinfolks. Leave him this canteen, an' let's get the hell away from here. Purty soon he'll start to squirm just like a dad-blasted rattlesnake, an' then we will have to waste enough powder an' ball on 'im to kill 'im for fair."

Martin glanced at the boy and the girl. They were standing there staring. Neither had spoken again, but the boy's attitude had changed. There was something like an admiring grin on his face now. The girl, also, had changed. The paleness was leaving her face. She had lowered her rifle, but suddenly she was straightening and whipping it back into the crook of her arm. She spoke slowly, evenly, as if giving Grandpa Johnny Joy time to pause and think of every word.

"You wait now, Grandpa Johnny," she ordered. "We don't know this man, and you know how it is with strangers in the valley. They've come among us before and you know what's happened. There has always been a world of trouble. The Buckhalters promised to bring in no more strangers; we can't risk it any more."

"Why can't we do somethin' just 'cause the Buckhalters don't?" put

in the boy. "Who're they to tell us what to do!"

"You heard what I said!" The blue fire was beginning to burn in the girl's eyes again. "Think of it, Grandpa Johnny! Only trouble will come from it."

"You givin' me back talk, young un?" The old man whirled upon her. "I said we'd knock along, an' that's what we're gonna do!" He whirled back to Martin. "Grab yore hoss, fella! Any man what shoots a Buckhalter has a right for a settin' of vittles to fill his belly at a Joy table, an' a bed to sleep in for one night, anyhow. Get a-stirrin'! I kind o' like the way yuh sling yore guns, but if yuh turn out wrong, I reckon it won't take more'n one bullet to kill yuh."

Sam Martin did not argue with them. Now that he had seen that skull-ringed hole in the rocks, now that wild, mysterious adventure had slapped him in the face, nothing was going to keep him out of it; nothing was going to keep him from getting at least a glimpse of what lay beyond the hole.

MARTIN turned and caught his horse's reins. He had a chance now for a better look at the skulls. Some of them were large, some were small. It was evident that the skulls of women and children were among them. Moreover, the bullet holes in the foreheads had been made long after the skulls were bleached and dry. The cracks showed that.

"Let's get goin'!" ordered the old man gruffly. "Sid's already comin' around."

As he said, the wounded man was already beginning to groan, to twitch and show other signs of returning consciousness. With the canteen left beside the man, they turned away. There was something about it that seemed inhuman to Martin. It did not seem quite right to shoot a man down, then walk off and leave him, but argument here was dangerous. A stranger's best bet was to keep his mouth shut, to ask no questions and do as he was told.

The boy and the girl led the way. Grandpa Johnny Joy fell in behind Martin's horse, and Martin could not help realizing that the move was not entirely a benevolent one to protect him from some unexpected attack from the rear. Grandpa Johnny Joy was simply back there to watch him, to observe his every move.

Martin frowned. As they moved on through the increasing darkness, he realized that he was virtually a prisoner. At one place in the darkness, he glanced back, and saw that the old man was walking beside the horse, keeping one gnarled hand dropped to the butt of his .45.

But the darkness was not for long. In fact, it was never really black once they were well inside the hole. There was always a strange haze ahead of them, and soon they were rounding a bend. Beyond the bend the sunshine streamed down, and the girl and the boy moved on at a faster pace, their weapons ready as if they expected to encounter danger at any moment.

The northern end of the passage was at hand now. Martin caught a glimpse of a dazzling sky ahead of them. For a moment it looked as if the boy and the girl were walking right out into blue crystal space, then Martin got a glimpse of the tops of trees. A few moments later he was again out in the hot sunshine at the end of the passage and looking down a long, steep slope to the floor of a valley a mile below.

It was a beautiful valley, once

Sam couldn't find Prairie Joy in that swirling torrent.

Martin was far enough out of the hole to get a sweeping view of it. It could have been no more than ten miles long and five miles wide. Timbered hills with long, unbroken lines of great cliffs above the treetops towered at either side of it and sharpened away to moss-hung crags and snow-capped peaks that seemed so awesomely high they punctured holes in the sky at every side.

Down through the middle of the valley wound a river, a broad stream of deep-blue water shaded by cottonwoods and willows that twisted its way off to the right to disappear two miles away in the black mouth of a rock-hung gorge.

Martin thought he could catch a glimpse of houses in the distance among the rimrock knolls and drooping willows five miles up the river. He did not see any more skulls except for the bleached skeletons of three horses lying down the slope to his left. The chalk-white skull of one of those had an unmistakable bullet hole in the center of it, and both skeletons lay on the slope as if they had belonged to horsemen who had come through the passageway of the human skulls and had had their animals shot from under them almost as soon as they were entering the valley.

Horses for the old man, the boy and the girl appeared a few moments later. They were half hidden among rocks in a pine thicket seventy yards below the hole. At a glance Martin saw that the saddles were old; so old they might have belonged to riders who had crossed the plains in the early days of the California gold rush of '49. But the horses were good. All of them were bays, big, rugged animals, rawboned, long-barreled, horses for fast travel in any kind of rough country.

TO Martin the silence had begun to grow oppressive. With the boy and the girl taking the lead on the horses and the old man following in behind, he again had the feeling of being a prisoner. He glanced back at the old man, venturing a question, and the answer that came from Grandpa Johnny Joy was a surly one.

"We don't talk a heap in here," the old man growled. "As yuh noticed, I reckon, we ain't asked a heap of questions from yuh. What the Joys an' the Buckhalters are fightin' over—well, I reckon that's the business of the Joys an' the Buckhalters. Later on, me an' yuh an' some more of the Joys will poke our heads together an' maybe talk things over. Right now I'm hungry as all hell, an' when I'm hungry I ain't no man to waste my wind with a lot of jawin'."

There was another long, irritating spell of silence after that. They reached the foot of the slope. Old Johnny Joy pulled rein long enough to allow Martin, the boy and the girl to water their horses in the edge of the river while he remained on a little rise with his rifle pulled across his lap, and his eyes roved up and down the valley as if on guard for trouble.

When the three horses had had their turn at the water, the girl swung away from Martin with her rifle lying across her lap. She made no pretense that she was doing anything other than watching him while the old man rode down to the water. Once they were moving on again, it was the boy who took the lead. The girl dropped back, riding beside the old man and keeping Martin a full two rods ahead of them.

It was a strange business. Anger flushed Martin's face. Once he was on the verge of pulling rein, turning his horse, and having it out with Grandpa Johnny and the girl, but he kept his anger to himself and rode along, holding his emotions the very best he could and waiting to see what was next in store for him.

The valley looked peaceful enough. It grew in grandeur every moment. Once an eagle floated majestically and so high in the sky it was like a slow-weaving dot against the blue. The mountains all around seemed to have grown tremendously higher. They now formed an incredulous wonderland of surrounding cliff, moss-bearded balconies two miles high in the air, and shimmer-

ing peaks extending so far skyward above that they thinned away to shining needles.

Martin saw bunches of cattle along the river. A herd of horses grazed here and there or stood half asleep in the shade. They were all of the same big, rawboned breed the three Joys were riding. Martin's eyes widened with slight surprise when he saw the brand on the right hip of one of the animals. It was the size of a man's fist and represented a human skull. There was no mistaking it, and Martin turned in his saddle, glancing back at the old man and the girl.

"I take it," he ventured, no longer able to refrain from saying something to break the monotony, "that this must be Skull Valley from all I've seen."

'Yo're a good guesser," nodded the old man Joy with that same sour look in his face. "All the stock in this end of the valley is Death Head stuff. Belongs to me an' my bunch. But don't take too many things for granted, young fella. As I said, we don't talk a heap—until we know who we're talkin' to."

IT was enough to silence him, and Martin kept silent. They crossed the top of a hog-backed little ridge. Huge log and stone houses, wide-spreading sheds and corrals appeared ahead of them, standing on a big, high flat above a winding creek that twisted away to eastward to join the river.

"That's the Death Head," Grandpa Johnny volunteered suddenly, as if answering a question before it was asked. "Them's all my folks that yuh see on the front porch an' in the yard. There's some few extra hands ridin' for me this year. Looks like they're jawin' again about somethin'."

"There's somebody lying on the porch!" exclaimed the girl in a voice suddenly sharpened by excitement. "Somebody's hurt!"

"Yore eyes are a mite better'n mine," conceded the old man, standing in his stirrups and shading his shaggy brows with his hand as he peered toward the ranch. "I still can't see nothin' to make me feel like flyin' off in a tantrum, Linda Lou."

But Martin could see that something was wrong. Young Trigger spurred his horse into a sudden gallop, and Martin followed with the quickening drum of hoofs behind them. In a few minutes they were at the foot of the flat and galloping up the side of it. When they reached the rim the noise of excited voices came to them, and somewhere in the din a woman was screaming and children crying.

The scene was a bitter one in a few minutes more. Martin found himself deserted and momentarily forgotten as the old man and the girl spurred past him. They kept their horses at a dead run until they reached the long log hitch rack under the big trees in front of the house. There they plunged their horses to a halt in a cloud of dust to hurl themselves from their saddles and rush forward to lose themselves in the crowd.

"An' they've killed another Joy, have they?" Grandpa Johnny yelled that above the rest of the noise. "Shot 'im down like one of the devils tried to kill me two hours ago!"

"They shot Hank in the back!" bellowed a big, bull-chested man with a wild cloud of bright-yellow beard swinging from his face to the buckles of his broad gun belts. "Didn't give him no show a-tall, they didn't. There's a hole in the

middle of his back big enough for a gopher to jump in. I reckon he didn't know what hit 'im. When we found 'im he was lyin' flat on his face, an' this thing was spread acrost his back!"

The man held up a yard-long strip of old oilcloth covered with faded yellow flowers painted on a pale-blue background. On the under side of the strip was carefully written a warning in black paint. As the big man stretched it above his head, Martin was able to read:

When Joys Go To Wearing Gold Buckles On Their Gun Belts, We Know Damned Well They've Found Overland Dave's Lost Sweetheart Mine

CHAPTER IV

WELCOME—TO HELL

GRANDPA JOHNNY snatched the strip from the big man's hand and waved it wildly above his head. "I know that tablecloth," he raged. "By the shades of lantern-jawed hell an' guncotton, I've et offn the thing only two years ago when we had a spell of peace with them damn Buckhalters. Now, damn them, they've killed my Hank!"

There were at least twenty men on and in front of the porch. They were all hard-looking and armed to the teeth. Martin was still unnoticed. He had dismounted, dropped his reins across the hitch rack, and was standing there leaning against it. As the crowd shifted back and forth, he could see the dead man lying there on his back with a stream of blood oozing off the ends of the old planking of the porch.

It was the body of a huge man. It looked to Martin as if all the Joys except old Grandpa Johnny were immense men. Yellow beard splattered with blood covered the face of the dead man. He still wore his six-shooters, old-fashioned weapons on broad belts with buckles that did indeed look as if they were hammered and fashioned from raw gold.

A sobbing and wailing woman in blue gingham kept moving in and out of the crowd. Words that kept coming from her in spasmodic sobs told Martin that she was the dead man's wife. His children were there with her. Martin counted an even half dozen of them. Five of them were boys, the largest a girl, who was no older than ten at the outside.

"Cut out the yellin'!" Grandpa Johnny was roaring everybody down now. "Brimstone an' damnation, this ain't no way for a Joy to act just 'cause one of us gets killed. Hell's catfish, *shut up!*"

But there were tears in the old man's eyes. Martin saw him toss his head, saw an old, old man fighting with himself, trying to appear unmoved; trying to be the king stallion of his herd. He was doing it, too. Martin saw him whip back his pinched shoulders. He saw him give the woman in blue gingham a shove that sent her on inside the house, and then he was shooing her crying brood after her.

"An' take Hank down to the crick an' clean 'im up!" he ordered. "Peel off his clothes an' get all that bloody muck offn 'im. Six or eight of the rest of yuh good-for-nothin's get picks an' shovels, an' light out for our graveyard. We're burying him the first thing come daylight in the mornin'. Dude"—he whirled to another yellow-bearded giant—"yuh an' Jude get hosses an' ride together up the valley to tell the rest of the Joys 'bout this thing. Hell's gonna pop round here!"

"Stranger in the valley, ain't yuh, pard?"

A VOICE sounding at Martin's left elbow gave him a little shock. He had been so absorbed in what was happening on the porch and in front of it, he had not seen the tall, thin-faced man who had moved up beside him. His skin was of an unhealthy mottled yellow.

There was something about this man that made Martin instinctively distrust him. His eyes were inky-black and narrow, his cheeks sunken. As a decided contrast to the other men, he was almost flashy in his dress. He wore a bright-green shirt and expensive black boots one hardly expected to see on a cowboy, and his breeches were of whipcord. A pair of engraved and silver-mounted six-shooters were at his hips, and a handsome black Stetson sat on the side of his curly head.

"I saw you ride in with Grandpa Johnny," the man was going on in a lazy undertone, without giving Martin a chance to reply to his question. "Nice old fellow if he takes the proper shine to you. Good as the gold they're all fighting over! Hell on horseback, if he mistrusts you. He's been hard hit today; Hank was his youngest son. My name's Pride. Stillson Pride. The boys call me Gunner. I've been here for almost a year. No wages, but I guess you *sabe* that." He smiled thinly, and Martin got a glimpse of gold-capped teeth. "A man passing through can always find grub and cartridges, and no questions asked as long as he behaves himself. *Sabe?* In other words, don't pull any funny stuff here—and you're all right."

"And what," ventured Martin casually, after he had introduced himself, "is this Overland Dave's Lost Sweetheart Mine business I read on the oilcloth?"

"As Greek to me as it is to you," grinned Gunner Pride with a shrug. "The most I know is that the Joys and Buckhalters are fighting about it. Some say there are tons of gold stored in the valley somewhere. I don't know. Not trying to give you a short answer, I don't care. But you must have seen all the skulls ringing that hole in the cliffs." He nodded to southward. "There was once a great gang of whites in here. Hundred or more of them, they say. There's supposed to have been a character by the name of Overland Dave Joy at the head of the bunch. Talk has it that he was wiped out with all hands and the cooks by somebody's fighters. Digger Indians, some say, did the job. Others claim it was Mexicans. I don't know—and it's a good idea not to know. If you've come hunting that gold, I pity you when Grandpa Johnny finds out about it."

"I didn't come hunting anything," frowned Martin. "I probably just drifted in like you did."

"Because, maybe"—Pride's eyes narrowed knowingly and the gold-toothed grin came back—"the going was hot elsewhere, and because the law never comes here? That's why most men come."

Martin nodded. He had said enough, possibly too much. He was not at all sure he could trust Pride, who was obviously feeling him out.

"It's nice enough here—when it's quiet," Gunner Pride went on. "Of course," he laughed in a whisper, "you're apt to stop somebody's lead, like Hank there on the porch. You're a marked man the minute you come here. A friend to a Joy is naturally an enemy to the Buckhalters. That makes it pretty close to hell."

"Where are these Buckhalters?"

"In Gun-barrel Canyon. That's just west of us. They hold the whip hand." Again a short, whispery

laugh came from Pride. "There are only two ways in or out of this valley. One's by the Skeleton Trail. You came that way. It was the only way you could have got in here alive. To get out or in the other way—well, that's through Gun-barrel, a narrow pass, and the Buckhalters hold it night and day."

A woman brought about Martin's temporary escape from the man. Excited voices were still raging about the porch. Grandpa Johnny seemed in complete command. Two men had brought up a rude stretcher, and the body of Hank Joy was being rolled upon it when the woman appeared.

She came whisking out on the porch, an unusually tall, lank woman in black with a bit of white lace around her throat. Martin needed no one to tell him he was looking at Granny Nancy Joy. She was old —very old—but there was fire in her gray eyes, and she fell upon Grandpa Johnny and the others like a hawk.

"Glory Hannah be!" she shrieked. "Is this fussin' an' spittin' like cats with sore tails still a-goin' on? Land alive, strangers would think nobody lived here but a gang of howlin' an' yappin' coyotes! *Stop it!*"

She stamped her feet, boxed the ears of a boy of ten, and moved right on to come to a halt in front of Grandpa Johnny. She put her balled fists on her hips and looked straight down in his eyes.

"Johnny!" Her voice had grown sharper, as penetrating as the scolding cry of a bird. "*Johnny!*"

"Yes . . . yes, Nancy?" Grandpa Johnny seemed to shrivel under her stare. "Ye-es, my dear?"

"Don't 'yes, my dear,' me when you know I'm mad!" Granny Nancy stamped the floor again. "I've heard you bellowin' up an' down this porch long enough. Come here!"

She caught him by the left ear. Grandpa Johnny snarled something and then was shuffled along and given a push inside the house. The woman turned, glancing up and down the porch as if seeking someone else. Her quick-sweeping gaze came to a halt on Martin.

"An' now you, young fella!" Her long arm and a sharp forefinger pointed at Martin. "Get yourself in here. I want to talk to you. Don't make me come after you!"

"Better go," advised Pride from the side of his mouth. "She's hell popping if you make her mad."

THROUGH the livin' room an' straight on to the kitchen!" ordered the woman when Martin removed his big hat and stepped upon the porch. "Kitchen's always the best place for me to talk. Guess I feel more at home there, 'cause I've been standin' over a fire an' cookin' for shiftless men an' lazy gals the most of my life."

Martin moved on. He was beginning to like Granny Nancy in spite of her brusqueness, in spite of the way she overrode everyone else. Here was a woman who would fight rather than stand and argue, rather than side-step and tell a lie about anything.

He passed through an enormous living room with a giant fireplace at either end of it. A huge, handmade table stood in the center. Big, skin-covered chairs were scattered about, and there was a long bench against the rear wall. But the thick log walls, peeled and polished until they were like shining dark mirrors, were a study. It looked as if every type of firearm that had been made for the past

hundred years hung in racks everywhere. Indian trappings and blankets were among them. Over the fireplace was a pair of old dueling pistols framed in their rosewood case. The room looked like a museum, but Martin had a chance for only a glimpse of it before he was ushered on through another doorway and down three short and broad steps into a long, low-ceilinged room that evidently served as both dining room and kitchen.

Grandpa Johnny was already there, hunched in a chair near the lower end of a broad table that was long enough to seat thirty or forty people. The old man's hat was on the floor beside him. He looked meek and subdued.

But the old man was not alone, and the sight of the second occupant at the end of the table caused Martin to shuffle to a halt. He had never seen a queen, but he knew he was now looking upon one in all her dignity. She was a tall woman of perhaps twenty-five. Like Granny Nancy, she wore black, but it was a shiny black. A fiery red band was around her throat. She was dark, her long hair as black and glistening as polished onxy. Cool black eyes looked at Martin, their glance sweeping him up and down. She was amazingly beautiful.

"That's *him,*" Grandpa Johnny grunted, with a wave of his hand. "I reckon yuh an' Nancy can go ahead an' take him apart like a couple of owls pickin' a jaybird."

"Mr. Him," smiled the young woman, and Martin saw that she was amazingly beautiful, "I am happy to know you."

"'*Him,*' huh?" questioned the old woman. "What a fetchin' name for a man, Johnny Joy!"

"It . . . it ain't just 'him,' my dear!" the old man hastily corrected himself. "It's Mojave . . . Sam Mojave. Or . . . or maybe," he stammered, "it's Mohawk. I—"

"No, it's neither," Martin broke in. "It's Martin—Samuel Martin." He bowed to Granny Nancy and then to the woman at the end of the table. "Sam, for short."

"I'm glad you come here with a name that sounds as though it might be your own," said Granny Nancy with her first hint of a tired smile. "That's Prairie Joy, one of my granddaughters, Mr. Martin. Prairie"—her quick eyes darted back to the younger woman's—"you can start the talkin'. I'll set out some grub."

MARTIN excused himself long enough to bathe his face and hands in a big basin on the back porch. It was an act that brought near disaster to Grandpa Johnny. Granny Nancy again took the old man by the ear. She led him to the porch, poured a basin of water for him, and proceeded to tongue-lash him like a scolding hen taking one of her brood to turn.

"An' wash behind your ears!" she ordered. "Don't just wet 'em an' wipe the grime off on the towel!"

"She ain't allus like this," confided the old man when his wife returned to the kitchen. "She's just makin' a bluff to keep back the tears over Hank. She'll calm down in time. But don't rile 'er." He glanced at the door and lowered his voice to a whisper. "She wags a crackajack-good .44-40 in her bosom, an' she's fanned several smart-talkin' jaspers down acrost the eyebrows with it in the past. I ain't the leastwise scared of 'er; I'm just cautious."

Martin had no answer for him. Everybody, as he had already seen, did well to walk lightly around Nancy Joy. They returned to the

table as noiselessly as possible, and almost eased themselves into their chairs.

"I fed Linda Lou an' Trigger when they first came in," explained Granny Nancy, bringing steaming platters of food to the table. "They was too put out over what's happened to eat much."

It was good food. Martin ate ravenously, making up for the weeks in the hills when he had had to shoot and cook his own. Prairie Joy was silent, sipping a cup of strong black coffee. Grandpa Johnny kept one eye on the plate and the other on his wife.

When Martin pushed back his plate, Prairie Joy at last began to speak.

"There was a time, and not long ago, at that," she explained, "when we never questioned a stranger who came our way. That time—at least for the present—has passed, Sam. We still want to take people at their word, but Granny has put her foot down, and I'm standing with her. My father was killed here a year ago, shot down from behind like . . . like Uncle Hank." There was a hint of a catch in her voice. "My mother followed him to the graveyard a few months later. I was the only child, a rare thing among the Joys. They usually have an army of youngsters. Grandpa and Granny fathered and mothered fourteen." She smiled faintly. "But I *am* a Joy"—a proud glint leaped into her eyes—"and Joy women have always fought beside the men. Which, perhaps, is beside the point." She shrugged. "I started to ask about you. We want to know something, as Granny would say, that we can tie to."

"That's simple enough," said Martin. "I've never been called a crook, a thief or a liar. I'm from Idaho. I left there with a clear record, and no sheriff and his posse drove me into these hills. Another thing, I didn't come looking for gold. Didn't know there was such a thing involved."

He sensed a quick tenseness in the room at the very mention of gold, but he went on telling about himself and what had happened to his family. When he was finished, he took a package of old letters from his inside vest pocket, spreading them upon the table.

"It's enough, Sam!" exclaimed Prairie Joy. She thrust out her hand in a gesture as friendly as a man's. "You're the first man to come here in years who would even talk about his past. If we've been hard on you, forgive us. You're welcome to the Death Head!"

CHAPTER V

LEAD FOR THE DEAD

GOOD, hard and simple people, descendants of the old pioneer stock that whipped and tamed the West! That was Sam Martin's opinion of them when he finally left the table. Twice while he was sitting there he had seen Gunner Pride saunter slowly past the window as if with both ears cocked to catch anything they could of the low conversation going on inside the big room.

That Pride was interested in something else at the Death Head became evident before sundown. Martin saw him talking to Linda Lou Joy several times. The man seemed to be always on the go, a nervous cat constantly pacing, constantly bobbing up silently here and there. And Linda Lou Joy was colsely interested in him.

Martin could see that out of the

corners of his eyes. The girl seemed to make it a point to talk to Pride at every opportunity. Once, just after taking his horse to the corrals and stables, Martin almost walked right upon them in a shadowy hallway. He stepped back into another darkened hallway just in time. He caught a few words between them, and they were words that puzzled him.

"You made a promise!" He caught the anxious, half-pleading catch in the girl's tone. "And you'd better keep it, Gunner. This thing's dead serious now."

"Listen, you!" There was something hard, something bullying in the man's tone. "I keep my promises. Only . . . only"—all the harshness went out of his voice—"I don't look on anything between us as a promise to be kept for just the sake of a promise. I love you, Linda Lou—you know that."

"Then keep your eyes off Prairie!" warned the girl. "Most men who come here think I'm pretty. They keep thinking it until they see Prairie, and then they fall all over their boots and spurs for her. She's better-looking than all the rest of the Joy girls put together. She knows more, too. She has a head on her. But get this, Gunner, and get it straight: Prairie doesn't care about men! She never has even had a beau—and she never will. You should know that by this time. She wouldn't wipe her feet on you—"

Martin heard no more. He moved on. He had learned a lot about the Joys in the conversation that had taken place in the dining room, and now he had learned something about Prairie. What Linda Lou said about men falling over their spurs and boots for her was only too true. She was an image that kept coming back to him, a woman cool, poised, a dark flower of near-maddening beauty that kept appearing in front of his eyes.

There was gold here—somewhere. Prairie Joy had been candid enough about it. Once accepted as a friend to the Death Head, the woman had seemingly tried to be as frank and outspoken as she could.

"You might as well know it now as later," she had told him. "After all, it's really not a secret. Many people know of it. If they don't know when they come, they soon find out. There was a man called Overland Dave Joy. He came here many, many years ago. With him came an army of men, many of them bringing their families with them. They found gold. We have ample proof of that in Overland Dave's letters that went back to West Virginia when Grandpa Johnny was only a small boy. It's here, tons of it, stored somewhere in this valley. Overland Dave's body guards it. He said that in one of his letters. I know it by heart. He wrote: 'We are surrounded by renegade whites, Mexicans and Indians. It is impossible to get more than a man at a time out of the valley. They may kill us all in due time, and the most of us expect they will; but they'll never find the gold unless they first tear my dead body apart to get to it.' Whoever finds the gold, Sam, can have a third of it. We've always said that. We ourselves have tried to find it for years, and the only part of it ever seen was found in a buckskin bag by Hank Joy. That was six months ago, and it was found in a dry creek bed, as if someone in flight had dropped it there."

"Then his belt buckles really were of solid gold?"

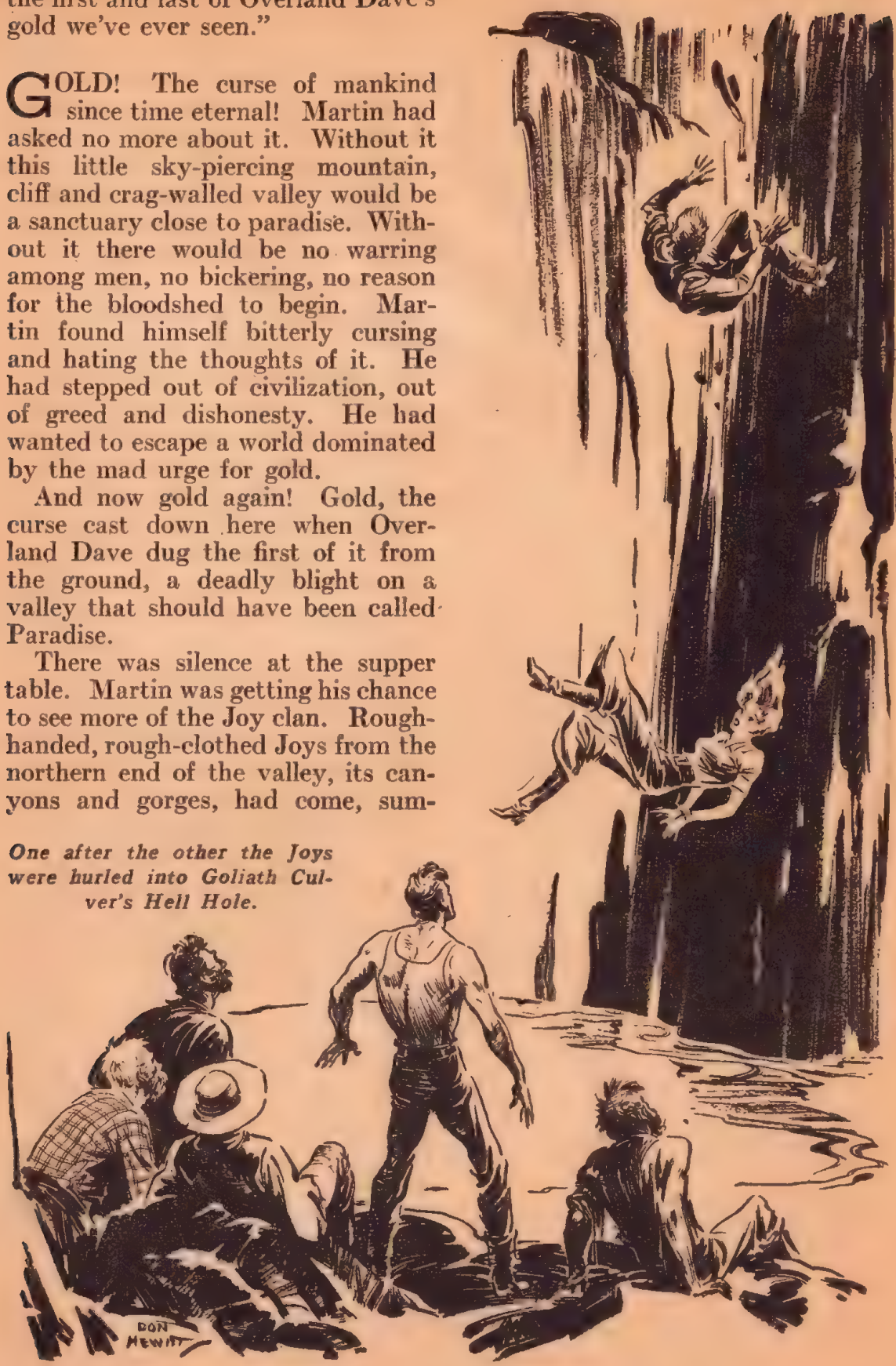
"They were," Prairie Joy had admitted. "But, as I've said, it was

the first and last of Overland Dave's gold we've ever seen."

GOLD! The curse of mankind since time eternal! Martin had asked no more about it. Without it this little sky-piercing mountain, cliff and crag-walled valley would be a sanctuary close to paradise. Without it there would be no warring among men, no bickering, no reason for the bloodshed to begin. Martin found himself bitterly cursing and hating the thoughts of it. He had stepped out of civilization, out of greed and dishonesty. He had wanted to escape a world dominated by the mad urge for gold.

And now gold again! Gold, the curse cast down here when Overland Dave dug the first of it from the ground, a deadly blight on a valley that should have been called Paradise.

There was silence at the supper table. Martin was getting his chance to see more of the Joy clan. Rough-handed, rough-clothed Joys from the northern end of the valley, its canyons and gorges, had come, sum-



One after the other the Joys were hurled into Goliath Culver's Hell Hole.

moned by Dude and Jude Joy. There was not a great deal of talk. They had been told the story of Hank Joy's cold-blooded murder before they left their homes, and further questions were not raised.

The body of the dead man lay in the living room on the huge table. Lanterns hung above the table, shedding a rosy glow of light. Men, women and children tiptoed in and out. Words were whispered in husky voices. There was no more crying or wailing. Death was a grim reality here, cold, silent, almost aloof in that yellow-bearded face in the lantern light pouring so softly down on the table.

Not yet had Sam Martin seen a single tear drop from old Granny Nancy's hard gray eyes. She had looked at the body several times. Once she had stolen a wrinkled hand forward, gently stroking the cold, upturned face of the dead man.

And then, at about ten o'clock, it happened. Martin was sitting in a corner of the room beside Prairie Joy when he heard it. The front door was open, and the sudden sound came shrieking in, a fierce, sickening wail followed by the flashing report of a rifle from the high rocks on a timbered knoll on the western side of the creek.

There was a sickening *plop!* The noise resounded in a dull echo all over the room, and the body of the dead man seemed to move slightly to one side on the table from the impact of the blow as a bullet struck it. A snarl of voices came from everywhere as men plunged to their feet like suddenly aroused animals.

"Blow out all the lights!" ordered the calm voice of Sam Martin as he leaped to his feet. "Shooting bullets into a dead man is too damned much for me even if I never saw a Buckhalter."

DARKNESS struck the room as if many hands had lifted at the same instant to snuff out every flame of light. They were none too quick about it. A burst of shots came from the rim of the flat to southward. Almost at the same time there was a long-ringing crash of guns to eastward. Another wild burst of firing started beyond the corrals, the splinters of light licking down from a knoll on the flat that overlooked the corrals. In the midst of all the sudden slap and whine of bullets, the yelling of men and the noisy scuff and ring of booted heels, Grandpa Johnny's voice cackled like some kind of a sharp old wind instrument sorely out of tune.

"Wimmin, grab yore young uns an' git to the cellar! Nancy, yuh keep to hell out o' this! It ain't no place for yuh, even if yuh do boss me 'round now an' then!"

But not all the women heeded him. Martin could see several rushing into the fight. Prairie Joy came close to him with a rifle. He snatched the rifle out of her hands and pushed her back from a window. He opened fire on the streaks of gunfire to southward, but Prairie was back in a few moments. Again she was armed with a rifle, and this time she thrust a heavy belt of cartridges into Martin's hands.

"A rifle knows only a good eye and a steady trigger finger!" she cried. "Move over, Sam, and give me room to at least show them what side I'm on! I can shoot as well as any man!"

There was no stopping the women, once they were into it. They were here and there, darting from one man to another. They knew what to do, and it looked as if they had been in fights like this many times before. There seemed to be an in-

exhaustible supply of rifles and ammunition, and each emptied weapon was reloaded immediately.

Martin downed a running figure on the rim of the flat to southward, and Prairie Joy gave an exclamation of approval. He tried to keep her pushed away from the window, but she still pressed forward, slipping closer to get in a shot now and then, and whenever Martin found his rifle suddenly empty, she thrust a loaded one in his hand.

It was a war, and a rousing one. The men outside kept closing in and falling back. The ones from northward several times attempted to fire haystacks beyond the corrals. Fighting men down around the old bunkhouse near the corrals drove them off, and twice put out small fires that were started when the men from northward dared to slip in by following dry ravines on the flat.

There was one man Martin wanted to see in action. That was Gunner Pride. Gunner had been in the living room no more than a minute before the bullet came through the front door and struck the dead man. He had had but little chance to leave the house before the burst of gunfire ringed it, and Martin waited his opportunity to see just what the man was doing and how he was fighting.

The opportunity came when the attacking men to southward suddenly fell back from the rim of the flat to cross the creek and join the other attackers on the big knoll to westward. That took the fight away from the south end of the big room, and it filled all the windows to westward, making it impossible for a man to get a place to fight there.

It took Prairie Joy out of it. For that Martin was thankful, for Prairie—intent on doing something—now turned her attention to men who had been wounded. It was Martin's chance. He passed from room to room, managing to get a snap shot here and there until he found himself in the dining room.

Gunner Pride was there, and from all his actions he was fighting just as desperately as the rest. Linda Lou was with him. With the girl was her brother, Trigger, and both of them were in the fight, carrying on as well as the men.

Here, now, Martin again found a window, but he had fired no more than five or six shots before the sudden, rising fierceness of the attack from the west drove him back to the living room. It was hell breaking loose there for the next thirty minutes. The bullets slapped and popped against the front of the house in a steady rain, showing that the men from southward had joined the men on the knoll, now, to the last man.

Soon others were joining the men on the knoll. It showed plainly enough that the attackers from northward were falling back, and before long it was evident that those to eastward were moving off.

CHAPTER VI

ATTACK IN THE CEMETERY

TAKING a moment out of the fighting for a breathing spell, Martin again made his way back to the dining room. To his surprise, he found it strangely quiet, and for a moment he saw no one.

Then Prairie Joy came out of a little pantry with a window in it at the northwest corner of the room. It was evident that she did not see Martin until she was almost upon him. She halted in surprise and he saw her jerk her right hand quickly behind her. She seemed alarmed about something.

"Oh, it's you!" she exclaimed, getting a better glimpse of him as he side-stepped into a blade of moonlight coming through the window. "You . . . you gave me a start. How's the fight?"

"Both sides burning a lot of powder," he told her. "But it looks like we have the best of it."

She said something. He did not catch it as a louder burst of noise came from a spurt of heavy firing in the living room. She was still keeping her right hand beside her. It was puzzling. It was as if she had something she was desperately trying to hide.

To give her a chance to hide it, he turned his back to her, walking on to one of the windows in the other end of the room. Something grated behind him at the stove. He glanced back over his shoulder, and saw Prairie straighten quickly. Now she walked to him and halted in front of him.

"Listen, Sam!" Her voice was almost sharp. "I've trusted you. Now you've got to trust me. Say nothing about seeing me in here alone, will you? I'll explain later. But, remember, *you never saw me in here alone*. Do you understand?"

"I don't, and I'm a poor hand at lying," he told her with a frown, "but . . . but if you say it, it goes as you want it to go. You trusted me, as you say, and I've got to kick back."

"Oh, thank you, Sam!" she said gratefully. She caught him by the hand, giving it a firm squeeze. "Come on. Let's get out of here. We came in together, didn't we?"

"We sure as shooting did!" he lied. "In this room together, and out together. If they hang me for it, Prairie, I'll still say it's true. Because" —he caught her suddenly by the arm, his grip almost fierce—"I couldn't deny you the moon if—"

Banging footsteps cut him off. Grandpa Johnny came stumbling into the room. He headed straight for the pantry, and grumbled something to himself about never being able to remember the three steps down from the living room that would some day break his neck. Then he saw Martin and his granddaughter and half halted with a grunt.

"Oh, hello!" he growled. "Fight's about over from the looks of things. They're all fallin' back. Guess we made it too hot for 'em. Anyhow, I'm goin' to get some shells for my ol' grizzly gun an' try to pick 'em off as they go, if I can get in action quick enough."

He hurried on into the pantry. Martin saw the sudden flare of a match. He heard the old man spit out an oath. For almost a minute it sounded as if he were struggling with something, and then he was returning to the room. A burning match was still in his cupped hands. The uncertain light flaring up across his face made it ghostly and drawn. When he spoke, his voice was a series of gasps.

"Gunner Pride's . . . lyin' on his face on the floor an' blood all over damnation! It looks like somebody's stabbed the heart out o' 'im with a butcherin' knife. So help me, that's how it looks!"

WHO stabbed Gunner Pride? The question flashed back and forth for the rest of the night after the attack was over. It seemed to be on every tongue at the breakfast table when daylight came and the crowds of hungry men and women started streaming into the kitchen. But no one appeared to hold the answer to it.

Gunner Pride was still alive. He had showed signs of rallying several times during the night. Twice—once at three o'clock and again just before dawn—he had returned to semiconsciousness long enough to speak, but it had been only a mumble that came from his cold, bloodless lips; words so utterly low and rambling no one had been able to understand them.

The rest of the crowd had come through the fight with flying colors. Most of the wounds received were slight. The man Martin had seen crash against the wall and go down had been shot through the shoulder and knocked into unconsciousness until most of the fighting was over. He was up for breakfast with his shoulder in a bandage, and sitting there among the wounded at the table, a man ready for another fight if opportunity would only afford it.

As soon as it was light enough, Martin had left the house to make a round of the big flat. Bloodstains on the ground showed him that at least seven of the attackers had been wounded. At the south side of the flat he found marks on the ground where the wounded must have been dragged away.

"And that was one that I downed," he told himself when he was making another survey of the fight after breakfast. "He won't be back soon!"

He was on his way back to the house when he met Prairie Joy. She wore a cowgirl's riding garb now, but she was still in black, except for a red bandanna on her head. There was a rifle under her arm, and a man-sized six-shooter hung ready for business at either hip.

"I've been waiting my chance to talk to you, Sam," she began. "You're wondering about Gunner Pride, I know, and you must think I had something to do with the stabbing. I didn't. That is, no more than to jerk the knife out of him and bury it in the ash box of the stove. If I had to kill a man, I'd never use a knife."

"But who did knife him, Prairie?" Martin asked. "Wasn't he alone in that room when you entered it?"

"Alone, yes," she admitted. "I didn't know he was there until I stumbled over him. That pantry, you see, is a storeroom for about everything: medicine, ammunition, Grandpa Joy's liquor. It's the ranch's catch-all. I went in there for a roll of bandages."

"And you don't know who stabbed him?"

"I didn't say I didn't know!" She frowned quickly. "Maybe I don't really know. Anyway, Sam"—she placed her hand on his arm—"it's nice of you to stand behind me."

"I trust you, Prairie!" He moved closer to her. Those black eyes were like strange magnets. "I . . . I guess I'm working too fast, but—"

"Don't say it, Sam!" She stepped back from him. "You must have heard that . . . that I'm a man-hater!"

"I think"—he looked squarely into her eyes—"you're a liar, Prairie!"

"Maybe I am." Wicked little lights danced in her eyes. "But that's my reputation, and I'm sticking to it."

They walked back to the house. At dawn two men had started hammering and sawing down at the corral. A coffin, so strong and heavy it took four men to carry it when it was finished, was fashioned for the body of Hank Joy. When the last nail and screw was in place, they had given it a coat of quick-drying black wagon paint. Now Grandpa Johnny brought out nickel-plated handles, a breastplate and thumbscrews. One of the women produced

a pillow and white cloth for the lining.

"We keep our own coffin fixin's on han'," the old man explained to Sam. "Have for years."

"Hit's all right 'cept for one thing, Gramp!" exclaimed one of the men a few minutes later. "We got the wrong breastplate for the lid, I reckon. Hit says on hit 'Our Little Darlin' '—made for a baby's coffin, I reckon. Anyhow, Gramp, Hank'd be mad as hell if he found out that was on his lid."

"Let 'im be mad!" growled the old man. "Sufferin' rattlesnakes, I can't tear down the whole damn storeroom just to find 'im one what says he was six feet four an' two-eighty pounds! Screw it on. If he only has to cuss about a breastplate, it'll be a heap better'n buck-jumpin' to get out of the way of the brimstone!"

THE burial took place two hours later in a little cemetery surrounded by tall pines on top of a big knoll on the flat about six hundred yards northeast of the house. It was a simple enough ceremony, and whether Hank Joy would have liked it or not, his coffin was lowered in the ground with "Our Little Darling" on the lid.

There was no crying, no wailing. Granny Nancy's eyes remained hard and dry. Only once did Grandpa Johnny rake something from his eyes with the backs of his hands.

"An' that's that!" the old man exclaimed in a husky voice when it was done. "Here today an' gone tomorrow; a little spell of life an' then death. The best we can do now is to try to forget."

Martin remained behind for a few minutes, looking over the cemetery. It had all the earmarks of a little boothill. There were dozens of graves, showing that the plot had been in use a long, long time. Concrete head and footpieces were at many of them with names and dates roughly scratched into them before the mixture had set. Most of the headpieces bore the name Joy, but here and there was a Buckhalter. But there were others, and some of them bore rough inscriptions that brought a smile to Martin's face. One of them was especially outstanding for its irony:

-: Here Lies the Body of Limber Jim :-
Hoss-thief, Sheepherder,
Squaw Man to Boot!
Caught with His Guns Off and Hung
on a Limb.
Departed from Rustling
May the 8th, 1871.

Martin was bent forward with his hands on his knees. He tried to straighten when a sudden shadow appeared on the headpiece from behind him. He was not quick enough. A crushing blow struck him on the back of the head, and the headpiece right in front of him seemed to burst into thousands of multicolored lights that vanished as quickly as they came, leaving everything suddenly turned to blinding darkness.

CHAPTER VII

THE HELL HOLE

THE grumble of hotly quarreling voices came to Martin when consciousness started returning to him. He was desperately cold. Icy water dripped steadily on the left side of his hatless head. Even the drip hurt, for each falling drop was like the slow, steady tapping of a hammer that seemed to be striking on naked skull and sending a reverberating pain rocking back and forth through his head in an endless rhythm.

"Yuh're a fool, Bazil Barker!" A

thick-voiced man seemed to be ripping the words from his mouth. "Chances are this dude'll never wake up; chances are his skull's busted just like the other two yuh fetched in. Dead before yuh picked 'em up where they fell! Whole back of their heads caved in. Why didn't yuh use that buckskin bag filled with buckshot I give yuh? Why in hell"—a fist banged a table violently—"can't yuh take my orders when I give 'em?"

"Damn it, Goliath, I did take orders as yuh give 'em!" rasped another angered voice. "I used that buckskin thing on 'im. If I'd hit 'im with my guns he'd be as bloody as a hog! Just 'cause I hit a couple of others with my .45s ain't no sign I hit this un with 'em, is it?"

"Whatever yuh done, yuh hit 'im a hell of a lick with somethin'."

"I hit 'em all a hell of a lick! Damn it, did I want 'im to let out a yell with the Joys only halfway back to the house? Why, a yell from him woulda fixed me purty. Come near gettin' myself fixed as it was. I was in a tough spot—"

"Oh, well, never mind!" cut in the first man's voice. "Take another look at yore bird. If that cold drip don't snap 'im out o' it, then nothin' ain't goin' to."

Martin was trying to sit up when a heavy hand clamped itself on his right shoulder and started to roll him over on his back. He managed to move his feet, but blinding darkness assailed him again, threatening to hurl him back into unconsciousness.

"Here, come out o' it, pardner!" The hand seized him roughly now. It jerked him to a sitting position, and held him there. "Yuh ain't dead. I said yuh wasn't, an' I know, even if Goliath Gulver does wanta make a liar out of me. *Come out of it!*" He gave Martin another shake. "I ain't a man to stand an' play with yuh."

"Wait . . . a minute!" Martin said weakly. "I'm coming . . . around. Give me a little time!"

"Pick 'im up, the rest of yuh fellas!" ordered the first voice Martin had heard. "Set 'im there at the end of the table where he can have the wall as a sort of prop for his back. An' don't handle 'im too rough, Bazil!" The voice lifted threateningly.

"Then let the rest of 'em take care of 'im!" The man who had been bending over Martin turned away. "I ain't no nussmaid, anyhow. My job's only to bring 'em in."

Martin was picked up by men at either side of him. Light came to him from somewhere as he was carried forward. With his eyes closed in an attempt to blot out the terrific pain in the back of his head, he felt himself lowered on a rock and eased back until his shoulders were braced firmly against a wall. It came to him then that his hands were fastened behind him with small ropes that were cutting into his flesh.

IT was not a pretty sight in front of him when he was able to keep his eyes open long enough at a time to get a full view of his surroundings. He was in a vast underground room somewhere with a big, bell-shaped lantern burning on a long-planked table in front of him. Rough-looking men sat at the table. Four of them were to his right. Three were sitting to the left. Others stood in the background with the lantern's glow casting weird splotches of light and shadow on their hardened faces. It seemed all of a minute—and it was possibly much longer than that—before Martin saw the

enormous man at the other end of the table.

He was a man of fifty who would have attracted attention anywhere. Sam Martin didn't need to be told this was Goliath Gulver. He was, literally, a Goliath, and he must have weighed four hundred pounds. His great chest alone looked a yard wide. The red-and-green-checked bosom of his shirt was open and flung back, showing fiery red hair inches deep on the chest. He looked like a red-headed, red-bearded gorilla. Even his eyes were reddish.

"Comin' out of it, are yuh, fella?" The man spoke with a lazy, deep-bellied chuckle. "Just take yore time. We ain't in no big hurry, now that we know yo're alive. Give 'im a shot of rattlesnake juice, boys, an' maybe it'll sort o' help 'im to clear the cobwebs from his brain."

Somebody held a tin cup of whiskey to Martin's lips. It was raw stuff, evil-smelling, and burned like carbolic acid when he managed to swallow it. He broke into a fit of coughing, and another man held a cup of icy water to his mouth.

"Nice work, boys," commented Gulver with another one of his deep-bellied chuckles. "I was never accused of bein' anything else other than a mighty obligin' host to my guests. How long have yuh been ridin' for Grandpa Johnny's Death Head, stranger? Seems as how I can't remember seein' yuh 'round the spread."

"I came there yesterday." Martin's voice sounded to him as if it had come from the other end of the table. "First time I was ever at the place. Where am I? And what do you want me here for?"

"Not so fast, not so fast, stranger." Goliath Gulver was suddenly leaning forward and planting his huge forearms on the table. "I'm askin' the questions, not yuh just yet. Did I hear yuh say yuh come to the Death Head only yesterday? Just *yesterday?*"

"That's what you heard," answered Martin wearily. "I was taken there by Grandpa Johnny, a girl named Linda Lou, and . . . and a boy they call Trigger."

"Then Grandpa Johnny sent for you, huh?" The man's little red eyes were like piercing needle points gleaming out of his wildly bearded face. "Had some deal to make with yuh, I reckon? Somethin' to do with gold maybe, eh?"

"He didn't have any deal to make, and he didn't send for me!" Martin insisted. "I went there by sheer accident. I was on a trail in a gorge. It finally was so narrow I couldn't turn back. I came to a place where there was a hole lined with skulls, and there I came upon Grandpa Johnny Joy—"

"Goliath, he's tellin' the truth!" cut in another big, dark-faced man who looked like a half-breed Digger Indian. "Hell," his voice broke into a rough, far-splattering laugh, "he's the bazoo who shot Sid Buckhalter an' made it so easy for us to pick Sid up an' pop the son of a gun in the Hell Hole!"

"Is that a fact?" Gulver's pig eyes widened into glinty, copper disks the size of a pair of dimes. "Two brought in dead—an' this un so new he won't know a *damned* thing!" He struck the table a blow with his fist that bounced the lantern and would have caused it to overturn if a man had not caught it just in time. "That makes three times in a row you've failed me in yore job, Bazil! *Three times,* yuh hear!"

"How . . . how was I to know he was new?" Bazil Barker came forward. It was Martin's first

chance to really look the man up and down. To his surprise, Barker looked like a twin brother to Gunner Pride, except that he was larger, heavier-bearded and fuller-cheeked. "I can't go 'round with a notebook askin' 'em their names as polite as yuh please, can I?"

"Listen to me, Bazil!" Goliath Gulver was suddenly on his feet and towering like a bushy tree above all the others. "I told yuh what to do, an' what not to do. Purty Charley told us about this fella last night. I told yuh not to get him, to let 'im slide, an' here—*damn it!*—yuh bring 'im in. I don't like that kind o' work. Damn yuh, I'll spot yuh a lesson."

IT was little short of murder. The giant's left hand shot out. It caught Barker by the shoulder. The man tried to jerk away. Once it looked as if his hands would dive to the six-shooters at his hips, but he was helpless. Gulver's right fist shot up. It smashed into Barker's face with a terrific blow that looked as if it had caved in the man's mouth and driven half of it down his throat.

Bazil Barker went down. Martin heard the man's head strike the rock floor. He heard it *plop!* as if a rotten egg had been thrown against a wall. Then the giant was swinging back to the table, and there was red death in his eyes as he swept the others with a belligerent glower.

"If he has any friends that don't like what I done to 'im"—Gulver's big hands had dropped toward the belted black six-shooters at his hips—"yuh boys all know what yuh can do!"

"Yuh know better'n that, Goliath," answered a tall, hook-nosed man with a Texas drawl. "There ain't more'n two in the whole gang what wouldn't cut his throat if it wasn't for yuh. None of the rest of us has failed yuh—an' won't."

"Drag 'im out!" Gulver jerked his head to two of the men. "Let 'im come out of it, an' from now on he'll walk a straight line. An' yuh, my fine rooster"—mean lights seemed to flicker in his eyes when he looked at Martin—"I'll have some more talk with yuh later on—maybe. Yuh can take 'im away, boys—to the Hell Hole."

Martin was quickly hauled to his feet. He was ushered forward, swung to his left and down a long, winding passage where streaks of daylight came in here and there through the cracks in the rocks. A turn to the right took them into another passage with a lantern burning at the end of it beside a heavy, iron-bound door, guarded by two heavily armed men who were playing cards on a rock.

The door was opened. Inky blackness lay beyond it. Martin hesitated, drawing back, but he was helpless with a man at either side of him. His move only angered them. They gave him a violent shove. He plunged forward into the bitter darkness, his feet pounding rapidly to keep him from falling on his face. The door slammed behind him just as he heard a rough shout of laughter burst loose, and then he was out in space and falling headlong in the darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

COMPANY DROPS IN

SOMEWHERE water spilled in a dull, rumbling waterfall. Martin had heard it when the door was opened, and he seemed to be plunging toward it. A flash of reflected daylight and a resounding splash ended the fall. Martin plunged far down in icy water that cut through him like a knife.

It was a deep dive. If he had hit the water flat, the breath would have been knocked out of him and he would have been rendered unconscious from the force of the blow. But Martin struck the water head-first. A swift whirl of current caught him, spinning him around and around. A dull glow of light in the water was in his eyes for just a moment. He was whirled away from it, again spun like a cork, and tossed

They had stumbled into the ceremonial temple of some long-vanished tribe—and death was close at hand.

up and down as if the mighty hands of some unseen monster in the water was making a football out of him.

A man could drown quickly here, but the icy water, itself, helped. It was so bitter-cold it robbed Martin of his breath, making it impossible for him to breathe if he had been forced to it. His head broke the water for just a moment. He thought he heard voices, but he was snatched under a second time, and again he saw the dull glow of light coming to him through a ragged round hole. He was swerved close to it, then hurled wildly away from it.

He was coming up again then, handicapped by his wrists still being fastened behind him. As his head broke the surface of the water for a second time he found himself in a deep, rock-bound pool. Now he heard excited voices above him. A rope bit through the air, its wide loop falling around his shoulders, and then a voice roared at him.

"Kind o' buck-jump in the water, fella!" commanded the voice. "We don't wanta get it 'round yore neck an' break it. Hurry! If yuh swing back under the falls, we may never get yuh out o' there!"

With a kick of both feet, he broke the water higher. The loop of the rope was instantly tightened. He felt himself being carried forward in the swirling, downward-sucking current. His back struck the rim of the pool. Quick hands reached downward, seizing him. He was hauled up roughly, and out into a hazy glow of light at the feet of a half-circle of men.

"Welcome to our town, stranger!" cried one of the men. "We've got no wood in here to build a fire, but there's a blanket yuh can wrop 'round yuh while yore clothes are dryin' out. Cut that piggin' string off his wrists, Flasher. Damn 'em, they coulda done it up at the door an' let the pore devil walk down the ledge, but that woulda been too decent for 'em."

They were quick about it, and they worked as if they had drawn many men from that same pool. The moment his hands were free, Martin felt men rubbing his numbed and useless arms. Others hauled off his boots. He was soon able to sit up and move his hands and arms while the dull, roaring drum of falling water kept growling like thunder in his ears.

Now he could see that there were an even dozen men around him. They were mostly all large men, bearded, rough-and-ready fellows. Light filtered down on them from a jagged round hole high overhead. It showed rock walls fading away into a round, smooth dome. Not yet did he see the waterfall. It was back there in the darkness with a fine cloud of spray blotting it from view.

"Prisoners like yoreself, pard!" explained one of the men, a big, ruddy-faced man of about forty. "I'm Flasher Buckhalter. That's Bill, Tom, Pete an' Riley Buckhalter. Sid's lyin' farther back on a bed we made for 'im. Some damn bush-whacker shot 'im yesterday. The others in here are sort o' mixed. That's Black Wing." He nodded to a tall, dark half-breed standing to the left. "Digger an' dago, Black Wing is, an' a better cowhan' never wore spurs. That's Punch Hilton, Fred Pell, Sack Snead. They make up the Buckhalter crowd. The other two are Death Heads—Walter Gleek an' Booger Joy, neither bein' handsome ner purty. What's yore name —an' where the hell do yuh come from ?"

"I'll tell yuh who he is!" shot in another voice, and Martin turned to

see a black-bearded figure rearing to one elbow on a bed of blankets and looking at him with dark eyes. "He's that damned bohunk what shot me when I was gunnin' for old Gran'pa Johnny! But no hard feelin's now, fella!" Sid Buckhalter held up his hand quickly. "Yesterday I woulda cut yore throat from ear to ear. Today I ain't in no harmin' mood. Us what're in here have done had all the fight taken out o' our briskets. Yuh done right good yesterday, an' I'm man enough to admit it today."

THEY had much to talk about after that, and they were all men who wanted to talk. They had talked about it so much among themselves, new ears to listen to them were sorely needed, and it was a rush to see who could get the first start and hold it.

"This is my fourteenth day here," explained Flasher Buckhalter. "Tom's been here more'n two months. They're roundin' us up like prize beef cows for a hurry drive—grabbin' thus un an' that'n. Some disappeared months ago. Ain't been seen nor heard of yet. We've naturally blamed it on Gran'pa Johnny's crowd. The old devil is downright mean enough to do anything when yuh get him mad. Just no way of makin' peace with 'im!"

"You couldn't very well expect it from what I saw yesterday," put in Martin, telling them of the death of Hank Joy and the warning written on the strip of oilcloth recognized by Grandpa Johnny. "That was enough to make anybody go to war."

"Shore, it was!" agreed Tom Buckhalter, who looked so tall and lean he might have been in the last stages of tuberculosis. Martin was later to learn that his illness was caused from bullet wounds picked up in a fight only two months before. "Gulver engineered that, knowin' just how it would make the Joys feel. Buck Buckhalter's been dead more'n four months. We picked him up with a bullet betwixt his shoulder blades, and on his back was a sign that said 'Finders are keepers.' That made us think that the Joys had shore enough found the gold an' was just tryin' to rub on insult to injury."

"An' then there's the pass between Gun-barrel an' Skull Valley," put in Flasher Buckhalter. "Ever' time a Buckhalter or anybody supposed to be ridin' for us stuck his nose in it, he got it knocked off with a bullet. We know all about it now. We thought Gran'pa Johnny was damn fool enough to plant some of his gang in there, an' I reckon he thought it was us ever' time one of his bunch got knocked off when they got around the mouth of the pass. Made fools of us—"

"Damn it!" another man interrupted violently, "hold yore hosses an' let me talk some!"

"Wait a minute! Just a minute!" put in Martin, for it looked as if a row was in the making. "Come down to earth! I can't make heads nor tails out of everybody sputtering away at once and making a noise like a gang of crows. One at a time and we'll get somewhere!"

"Which was what I was tryin' to do!" growled Flasher Buckhalter. "Hell, I'm as good a teller as any of the rest, an' maybe a sight better'n most. Tom couldn't pour polecat musk out of a boot if the directions was writ on the heel an' he had somebody to tell 'im right where to find 'em. Now, as I was sayin', an' comin' up to the point mighty fast in my own way—"

Finally Martin had the story. Tom Buckhalter put the finishing touches to it.

"Goliath Gulver comes along, huntin' a hide-out for 'imself an' his gang," explained Tom. "We took him an' four of his men in. Others followed. The tale of the gold naturally leaked out. Allus does. Goliath started workin' on us. Not only does he figure on gettin' the gold some day, he figures now on gettin' Gun-barrel Canyon an' Skull Valley; figures on gettin' the Joys an' the Buckhalters all out o' the way, an' then he an' his gang will have it the way they want it. An' he was nice about it. Even loaned Buck a thousan' dollars last spring.

"He's brought in more an' more gunmen!" he continued. "Forty, I reckon, all told. Blowflies from hell, if yuh ever saw 'em come, only sometimes they'll play meek as mice. Two even married a couple of our wimmin! Some are scattered among the Joys, some with Buckhalters, an' the rest hidin' out in these cliffs north of the pass. They boast that they've found the old workin's of Overland Dave's Lost Sweetheart, but that ain't nothin'. There's workin's all up an' down Skull Valley—an' up an' down Gun-barrel, too. We've found lots of 'em, but not the real one."

"An' maybe never will!" added Flasher Buckhalter. "Skull Valley was Skull Valley long before Overland Dave come here. Old Indian buryin' ground. Cliff dwellers here an' yon before they come. There's dozens of holes in the cliffs filled with skeletons. Yuh find 'em all along Skeleton River, which is the stream what cuts down through the valley. They're ever'where, an' maybe Overland's movin' in on sacred buryin' ground is what made the Indians so mad. I—"

"But," cut in Martin, heading off another long run of talk, "past history doesn't matter so much now. What are they keeping us here for —and how are we going to get out?"

"We ain't gettin' out!" Pete Buckhalter told him. "We're stayin' until the last Buckhalter an' Joy's put in the clear. Stayin' until Goliath can round up an' question ever' man an' woman, an' then, I reckon, he'll just seal us in here—and forget about us. A few more skeletons won't matter. He told me that with his own mouth when I was brought here wound up in my saddle rope, the one we pulled yuh outa the water with. If he finds that neither Buckhalters nor Joys actually know where the gold is, there won't be a speck of use in his waitin', an' I think he's about decided that—"

HOURS passed. The talk continued. Speculation came from everyone, and they were still talking when the light started to fade in the jagged hole high above their heads.

"The slop they feed us on is late ag'in," growled one of the men. "Sometimes it don't come at all. They just open the door up there, set a bucket of truck inside, an' somebody whistles. One of us goes up a ledge back in there an' gets it. I think it's comin' now. Believe I heard the door squeak."

Martin had heard nothing other than the dull roaring of the waterfall back there in the spray and darkness, but the sound was soon audible. It was a wild, far-reaching splatter of laughter, punctuated by a woman's shrill scream of terror.

The rest was quick enough to take a man's breath away. Down through the darkness and into the hazy light plunged the form of a woman in black. Martin caught a flash of red on her head and recognized her instantly as Prairie Joy. Her hands were tied behind her back, and she

was coming feet first, her black riding skirt flaring wide. Even in the hazy light Martin could see her face. It was a face of terror, black eyes staring. Like a plummet she shot on, her feet cleaving through the water. There was a splash, and the water closed over her.

Martin was already going forward, a leaping figure heading straight for the pool. A fierce yell halted him. He looked upward. Another plunging figure was coming, a rocket shooting out of the darkness with old chaps flopping and white hair shining like silver.

It was Grandpa Johnny Joy! Behind him there was another scream, then a high-pitched yell. Two more figures were coming. They were almost together, two spinning shapes coming down with breath-taking swiftness.

"Hell an' horse feathers!" yelled Flasher Buckhalter as the last figure struck the water and vanished in a spouting splash. "Company just will drop in! Seems as how the whole Joy family's come a-visitin'. Prairie, Linda Lou, Trigger—an' Old Billy Hell to boot!"

CHAPTER IX

HALL OF THE DEAD

MARTIN was in his trousers and undershirt. He had slipped on his boots only a few moment before. His first impulse now was to plunge into the pool, but one of the Buckhalters caught him, throwing him back.

"Rope's better!" bawled the man, keeping himself in front of Martin. "We've got to be quick!"

Grandpa Johnny's head had already bobbed above the surface. The rope shot forward, the loop settling around him. Before he could be hauled to the edge of the pool, Linda Lou and Trigger Joy appeared, their heads breaking the surface of the water.

The work was desperately fast. Grandpa Johnny was drawn to the edge of the water with the loop of the rope around his neck. A man seized him. The rope was cast off, and Linda Lou was next. They hauled her out, literally hurled her back on the rocks, and made another lightning cast of the rope. Trigger Joy came out of it now with his big teeth chattering and his eyes looking as if they were about to pop out of his head.

Martin was at the end of his tether by this time. Prairie Joy had not yet appeared. She was down there somewhere, probably slapped into unconsciousness by the water and caught under some ledge and unable to come up. He could wait no longer. With men yelling at him, he dived off the rim of the rocks, and was again caught in the icy grip of the whirlpool.

It was like instant death this time. There had been enough terror in it before to take up some of the shock. Now it was like an icy dip at the North Pole. He went down, deeper and deeper. The swift, lashing currents of the water caught him. He was spun around, hurled back and back into terrible darkness with a wild roaring and thunderous splashing overhead.

He was hurled to the surface. Instinctively he knew he was behind the waterfall. He searched the water back there, and dived again, trying to go back the way he had come. The force of the falls flipped him back like a piece of driftwood and brutally hurled him flat against a jagged rock.

It took the breath out of him. For a half-minute he had to hold on to a rock with his head above the

water and showered with spray. As soon as he could, he was diving again, going down as deeply as he could to break through.

Again the force of the spilling water hurled him back. This time he caught himself by thrusting out his hands to keep from being thrown hard against the rocks a second time.

It looked hopeless when he had been thrown back a third time, but he could not quit this thing. Like a man driven with terror, he managed to climb up on a shelf of rock. Now he dived all the way to the bottom of the pool. The water pounded above him. It looked like he was going to be thrown back for the fourth time, but some swirl of the water changed, hurling him forward and upward.

As his head broke the water he saw the excited mob of men above him. Prairie Joy was not with them. He saw that at a glance, and dived in time to escape the loop of the rope that was thrown for him as the men attempted to save him in spite of himself.

Now it was death! He went down and down. The water slapped him against the rocks. He made one complete circuit of the pool, broke water a second time, and again went down. He was getting used to the cold now, but it was deep and dark down there, a churning, roaring hell of boiling black water and swirling currents again tugging at him and hurling him about as if monster hands were playing with him like a toy.

Again that hazy glow of light at the near-bottom of the pool came to him. It was dimmer now, but as a last resort he headed toward it. It was a hole, a narrow one, but he took the risk of pulling himself into it. Once into it, the water did the rest. It pressed behind him, scraping him against the rocks, beating him from side to side, and thrusting him on like a bullet being forced from the barrel of a gun.

He rounded a bend to the right, was hurled to the left, shot around another bend, and saw the light suddenly brighten ahead. Now the dangerous bends were behind him, and he was free of the hole at last. He started upward, fighting the water furiously. Suddenly his head was above the surface of it. He was hurled forward, thrown almost clear of the water, and slapped down flat on his face on the glass-smooth slope of a rock. He shook his head, reared to his hands and knees, and found himself face to face with Prairie Joy!

"IF you ask me," Prairie said weakly, "that was one wild buggy ride, Sam Martin! How did you get here?"

"The way you did!" he answered in a voice that was almost as weak as hers. "Like . . . like others behind us. I stayed . . . too long in the cemetery. Here, let me untie you."

His fingers were all thumbs when he tackled the ropes on her wrists. He finally used his teeth. Once the ropes were off, he helped her to stand. They were both so cold they could scarcely stagger up the slope of the rock. As they reached the top of it they halted and Prairie Joy crowded back against him in sudden alarm.

"Sam, what is that?" she exclaimed. *"It . . . it's alive!"*

The hellish thing certainly looked alive. It was enormous, twelve feet wide and twenty feet high. There was something about it that might have been the distorted image of a man, but it was more like a mon-

ster with its great horn head and bulging eyes. Wide blue lips snarled at them. Yard-long fangs were bared. Its hands were huge claws, each spread, each ready to seize something in its terrible grip.

"It . . . it's some kind of an idol, Prairie!" gasped Martin. "It's not alive!"

"Yes, it is!" she insisted. "And—Oh! Look! Look at . . . at all the others! Sam, I'm frightened! This . . . this must be Satan's storehouse!"

They forgot their cold. It was enough to make them forget. The thing in front of them was a giant totem—like the totem poles one saw in the Indian villages in the Northwest, from the upper rim of the Puget Sound to the Far North. Unlike the painted wood poles of the North, this thing was made of baked clay and would stand through countless centuries—a half-man, half-beast god, all bulging eyes, snarling mouth, and terrible claws and fangs!

There were others, and there was yet light enough from the sky to see them. The light came down through a long, ragged crack five hundred feet overhead. It fell upon a great hall twice as wide and twice as long as the crack. Ledges and shelves carved from the solid rock were up there, each lined with human skulls grinning down on the scene.

"The ceremonial temple of some long-vanished tribe," whispered Martin. "Look at all the picture writing. It's everywhere!"

It *was* everywhere. Every shelf and ledge was carved with it. And there were dozens of other baked-clay images. All sat with their backs to a huge altar in the center of the great hall, each frowning and scowling as if to keep the evil spirits away while human sacrifices were going on.

A man's hair stood on end here, for it was a grinning hall of hell and nothing short of it! Thousands of those grinning skulls looking down kept the chills running up and down one's back. Martin could only imagine what it had been like in the days when the altar fires burned: the flames leaping, the priests and their puppets dancing, girls doomed to the knife and the fire probably singing their death songs, the crowds wailing, the devil men chanting and going through their hideous contortions.

"It's terrible, and . . . and yet it's awe-inspiring, Sam!" cried Prairie Joy. "I can almost hear people moaning, hear them whispering and crying. Look! The death dance! It's clear, it's plainly pictured up there!"

MARTIN'S eyes followed her pointing finger to a great, smooth slab of the wall to their right that had been plastered with clay and the clay baked against the rocks. Time would never erase the colored pictures upon it. They were yet bright, and to Martin's surprise they were amazingly well drawn.

It was the picture of a hundred or more dancing girls that might have been taken from some far-away Balinese temple. There was grace and rhythm in every step, in every uplifted arm. In one hand each girl held something that might have been a tiny tom-tom, and they were strung down a long stairway of stone, one that seemed to have its beginning in the blazing silver clouds of the sky. The ending was a pit of fire with the girls dancing themselves into it.

"Look, Sam!" The woman caught

him by the arm. "There it is, over there! The steps! The fire pit! And far up there, the sky! They came down, through that opening up there. Artists, real artists, made that giant plaque, Sam! Oh, *oh!* It makes me almost forget the horrible things Goliath Gulver said to me!"

"I'd already forgotten him!" confessed Martin. "How the devil did you fall into his hands?"

"Over the muzzles of guns when we were out looking for you," she answered. "We missed you and went back to the cemetery. We found your hat, and knew that some foul play had taken place. The Death Head started a search. One of our own men led us into a trap. Before we knew it we were surrounded by men and guns. But don't talk of it now, Sam, please! I see a way out for us up there." She pointed up the great steps in the wall to their left. "Let's look, and look, and *look!* For the first time in my life I know the real meaning of awe.

"For there's something here, Sam!" She moved closer to him. "I can feel it. All my life I've laughed at ghosts, at the thoughts of them. I'll laugh no more. They're here, all around us, in the air, in those sightless skulls grinning down at us. I can hear them whispering, Sam."

She crowded right back against him now. A violent spasm of trembling had seized her. It might have been the reaction of the cold water, but it startled him. For a moment he thought she was going mad. He put his wet arms around her.

"Easy, Prairie," he comforted her. "Too many shocks in one day can carry you completely away with yourself. There's nothing to fear here. The dead are gone. Nothing will bring them back. As far as these gods of things"—he laughed—"they don't amount to a snap of your finger."

"Don't say that, Sam!" She whirled upon him and quickly slipped her hand over his mouth. It was so cold and white it made him think of death. "There's something in here that won't like to hear you say that. Listen! Can't you hear it? The girls over there are singing! I hear them, Sam!" Her eyes were suddenly wild, her face like chalk, and her body trembling and jerking violently. "Listen! It . . . it's beautiful! It . . . it's weird. *They are singing while they are dying!* Oh, Sam, please get me out of here before I go raving mad!"

"But you don't hear anything, Prairie!" he cried. "There's nothing here. Nothing but hellish-looking old idols, a relic of the past! I tell you there's nothing to fear from any of these damned things!"

"Don't say that!" She was upon him like a dangerously crazy woman now. "I tell you, I can hear those girls singing. And now—and now something terrible is coming, Sam. *Listen!*" She shook him angrily. "You must listen. Just hold your breath. Now, now, *now.*"

He heard it then. At first he thought his ears were playing tricks with him, but it was there, a soft whispering coming from the direction of the great plaque. It was strange, unearthly, and yet it was a chorus of human voices, the sound of a low, infinitely sad, infinitely sweet singing. He continued to listen, almost mesmerized by the sounds. It was as if he could catch the very refrain of it, the word of a barbaric, long-forgotten tongue here, another there.

"Like the swans when they are dying," whispered the woman. "Now

something else is coming. I heard it growling in the distance. It . . . *it's coming, Sam!*"

He heard it. It was low and terrible, the beginning of a wild surge of wailing. It came as if from afar, as if a great, weeping throng was slowly moving forward. He heard the rolling rumble of drums, the crash of hard cymbals, the whimpering of strange reed instruments.

The sounds grew. They became raging thunder filling the great hall. They rocketed back from side to side. They were underfoot, overhead, to the right and left—right in his face and right behind him. It was voices, human voices, wailing, shrieking, crying. For a moment he felt that he could actually see near-naked savages all around him, men beating their chests and gnashing their teeth, the women screaming and pulling their long hair.

He was like a man turned to stone. He stood there, weak from head to foot, icy balls of perspiration oozing out on his forehead. His mouth was open. He was staring upward, at that ragged slit of sky high above him, a man captured in a strange, hypnotic spell. He was not even conscious that Prairie Joy had fainted and was lying there in his arms.

CHAPTER X

A SKELETON STIRS

WIND—that was what it was! It was almost a minute before it came to him, and then he understood. Winds blowing high above them were striking certain rocks up there and being reflected downward. Strong drafts from somewhere swept them along. Pottery, fashioned and baked by master hands, probably had something to do with it.

Shaking back his shoulders as if to arouse himself from a stupor, Martin moved on with the woman still in his arms. He rounded the great altar, and found an ancient stairway. It led up and up for two hundred and fifty feet to an archway of stones connecting it to the stairway that led down the wall to the ancient fire pit. Once across it, he was heading for the great crack still two hundred and fifty feet overhead.

Prairie Joy showed signs of returning consciousness before he reached the top of the stairway. At the top he found it overrun with brush and clouded under overhanging limbs of dwarfed pines. He pressed through them and stepped out into sudden warmth.

The sun was not yet down. It was still a red ball of fire just beginning to tip the blue mountain ranges to westward. Martin and the girl were high on a mountaintop now with great rocks standing all around them. He looked down, to westward, and saw a deep canyon winding away in the gathering shadows. That would be Gun-barrel, and to the east lay Skull Valley—three thousand feet straight down through space to its floor!

Martin eased his burden down on a smooth, warm rock and started rubbing her wrists and gently slapping her cheeks. Her eyes opened after a minute. She looked up at his face, a puzzled frown wrinkling the corners of her eyes for a moment, as if she were trying hard to remember him. Then a wan smile twitched her lips.

"The 'fraidy cat must have slipped out on you, Sam," she said apologetically. "Was it a nightmare? Or . . . or, perhaps, just a trick of the imagination?"

"It was all things wrapped to-

Sam Martin cut loose to shoot clear of that hell of horrors!

gether," he told her with no smile yet showing on his face. "It was strictly hell, and yet it was a way out of our trap—if Goliath Gulver doesn't find out about it too soon."

While she lay there basking in the heat of the yet-hot sun, he told her all about the holes behind them, and to his surprise he found that she knew almost as much about the prisoners in the first hole as he did.

"Grandpa Johnny knows now, too," she told him. "But Goliath Gulver will have a hard time reaching us up here." She added that when she stood beside him and took one sweeping look at the surrounding country. "We're on the very top of Mystery Peak. There's a drop-off to northward of a thousand feet. It's more than that in every other direction. No one we've known has ever been able to get up here. There's one place overlooking Skull Valley that's called the Stairway to Heaven, and it has all the markings of having been hewn out of the rock by human hands, but hundreds of feet of it have fallen away, leaving only smooth stone. No one could go up or down that way. Look!" She lifted her right hand quickly to point. "What are those things?"

HE stared through the rocks and then frowned. What he saw looked like a honeycombed plastering of some kind of giant insects, and then he saw that it was an array of pottery of some sort.

"Wind catchers!" he exclaimed when they moved closer. "That explains that hellish singing and wailing down there! Look, this one's

flared out like a ventilator you see pictured on ships. There are dozens of them, scattered everywhere! The old boys who lived here knew a thing or two about keeping their people impressed with their brands of hell fire. They were probably offshoots of the Incas, the Aztecs or perhaps the supposedly mythical Toltecs! Anyway, it'll take a wiser head than mine to figure it out, Prairie Joy!"

They moved on, finding more and more fantastic objects, until they came upon something that looked like a trail. A moment's examination showed that it *was* a trail, one that had been smoothed away here and there by crude tools. It led away among the tall boulders, and suddenly swung to the right to mount an abrupt rise. Martin's pulse quickened when he pushed through the low limbs of a clump of small trees and saw something that looked like a man-made tower of stone ahead of him.

"A lookout station, probably!" he exclaimed. "If it is, maybe we can get some kind of a signal down to the valley!"

"It *is* a lookout, Sam!" cried Prairie a few moments later. "But no ancient race constructed it! Look at those iron straps on the door. They were made from the iron tires of wagon wheels!"

They were right upon it now. It was an earthen-floored hut of stone, but white men had certainly had something to do with its construction. The door was hand-hewn. In the middle of it—burned deeply there by a red-hot iron—were the letters "O. D. J.," and Martin heard Prairie Joy quickly catch her breath behind him.

" 'O. D. J.'—Overland Dave Joy!" she cried. "Open it, Sam! Open it quickly!"

He had no trouble obeying her instructions. The door was lopsided. The upper hinge had rusted and broken away. When Martin took hold of it, the second hinge snapped, and the door came down with a crash on the ground.

"Holy mackerel!" He whistled his surprise. "Look what I see now. It's a lookout station—and the lookout's still on guard!"

He was looking into a room no more than ten feet square. Narrow slits of windows were all around it. Dry-rotted and weather-hardened remains of strips of buffalo and deer hides still hung over them as if to keep out winter cold.

The guard was on the floor, lying there half buried in deep sand with a bullet hole in his whitened skull. Tatters of buckskin still clung to the bones. A rust-eaten muzzle-loader rifle with a broken stock lay beside him. Half-consciously, Martin reached up to take off his hat, and then lowered his hand quickly when he realized that he was standing there bare-headed.

" 'We will defend to the last man!' " quoted Prairie Joy at Martin's shoulder. "Those words were in the last three letters that came from Overland Dave!"

"And to the last man they defended!" Martin said solemnly, stepping on inside the hut and halting beside the skeleton. "They grew fighting men in the old days, Prairie. I—"

Something snapped underfoot. It was as if the long-dead man was violently stirring back to life. Martin tried to jump to one side. Instead, he was suddenly plunging downward through sand and old wood with the skeleton appearing to whirl over on

his side and fling his rattling bones around him.

HE did not fall far, but came to a halt with the bones of the skeleton still rattling around him, old wood falling, and the sand pouring down in a blinding and suffocating cloud. He heard Prairie Joy call his name behind him. It was nearly a minute before he could answer her.

"I'm all right!" he gasped when he came scrambling back up out of the hole. "And I think I've found something, Prairie!"

"I know you have, Sam!" Her face was flushed and white by turns. "In almost every letter Overland Dave wrote, he mentioned something about the lookout. It's clear now. This . . . this thing has something to do with the Lost Sweetheart!"

Martin had only one of his personal possessions left. He had been robbed of his guns, his money, his watch and even his pocketknife, but Goliath Gulver's crew had overlooked one thing, and that was a waterproof little match case in the watch pocket of his trousers.

"What we need is a torch—and we're going to get it!" he said. He went to the old door and started to pound on it with a sharp-ended stone. "That skeleton was guarding the hole in the floor. The sand was only a blind to hide the planks, but it served its purpose."

They were in a frenzy after that. The lure of discovery was upon them. They forgot even Goliath Gulver and his gang. Martin fashioned his torch hurriedly. It was a clumsy thing, but he finally had it burning.

"Steps are below the hole!" Prairie told him. "Cut in stone! I'll follow you. Give me your hand!"

He slipped back through the opening. Some of the dust had settled, and he could see a winding passageway ahead of them, but when they were at the foot of the steps Prairie Joy suddenly halted. She reached down, and took something from the remains of the skeleton.

"A belt buckle!" she whispered excitedly. " 'O. D. J.' is carved on it. I saw it just before you fell. Overland Dave's own skeleton guarding his gold! Go on, Sam. Hurry!"

They seemed to go downward for almost two hundred feet. At last they struck a level. All along here was the work of ancient tools in the rocks. They kept going, sloping downward again. A raw wind cut them. They heard running water somewhere far below, and then, turning a bend, they found themselves on a broad ledge high above the ancient altar and the hideous gods of the great temple.

"Which means," exclaimed Martin when they paused to catch their breath, "that the ancients must have worked the Lost Sweetheart long before white men set foot in the country."

She only nodded, urging him on. They swung to the left, following another long passageway. It was gradually widening, and suddenly they were stepping into the huge room of an ancient working.

"Look!" Martin held the torch higher.

They did not need to look to see that it was gold. Stout deerskin sacks were stacked against the walls. Many of them were rotted open, spilling their great piles of fabulous wealth on the floor.

"Gold!" cried Prairie Joy. "Overland Dave's Lost Sweetheart at last! He had hunted for it for months, Sam. Then his sweetheart got lost in these cliffs—and when he found

her he found the mine! Now maybe the warring will come to an end! Maybe now we can divide it and bring peace—"

"Hush!" Martin hissed the warning. He suddenly lowered his torch and threw his arm around her. "I hear voices, Prairie. They're close to us!"

CHAPTER XI

THE CLANS UNITE

HIGH, low, jack an' the game! Sometime when yuh wanta learn to play five-up, come 'round an' see yore uncle Dudley! Eleven dollars an' four bits yuh owe me, big boy, an' my baby needs the shoes!"

The voice, rough and rowdy, seemed to come up right under Martin's feet. At the same time, it appeared to rocket toward him from every wall, from mined holes in the room where still-rich veins of gold waited for the digging. It was a long time before they heard another sound, and then a wild burst told of tempers ready to flare.

"Yuh hooked that jack off the bottom, Steeger!" raged a voice. "No wonder yo're winnin' my head off these last rounds! This kitty goes to me or we fight right here an' now!"

Martin was able to locate the voices then. They were ahead, down a winding passageway, and it was evident from the sounds of them that the discovery of his and Prairie Joy's escape from the Hell Hole had not yet been made.

"There's our chance," whispered Martin. "Each man's packing a pair of six-shooters, and each one has a rifle. I saw them at either side of the door when they flung me in the Hell Hole."

"But . . . but where are they?" whispered Prairie, clinging to him. "The voices sound in all directions, Sam."

"I know"—he nodded—"but leave it to me. Stay behind me with the torch and keep the torch low. We'll see what we can."

They stole forward. Martin kept twenty feet in the lead. As the grumble of voices grew closer, he dropped to his hands and knees. The girl followed his move. They crept around a bend, and Martin suddenly saw a hazy glow of light ahead of him.

It was a hole when he reached it, but it was gouged upward in the rocks, making it almost impossible for anyone below to see it. He eased his head into it, craned his neck forward, and was able to look down over the rim of a narrow ledge.

He was at the right place, and he had guessed it from the start. Fifteen feet below him were the two guards at the door of the Hell Hole. The lantern was above them, hanging from a nail on the door. On the rock on which the men were playing cards now stood an empty whiskey bottle.

"I'm tired of this game!" Even as Martin looked out of the hole he saw one of the men suddenly stand and disgustedly throw down his cards. "Ever' blasted time I start winnin' from yuh, yuh begin bleatin' like a damned old ram that I'm cheatin'." The man yawned, stretched his long arms over his head, and looked upward. Martin withdrew his head just in time. "Let's quit at least till the gang gets back."

"Just as yuh say." The second man threw down his cards. "I'd like another drink. Think we can hit Goliath's keg just once more without 'im catchin' on to us?"

"Not by the quart, we can't,"

warned the second man. "For a couple of healthy snorts, I'd say yes. Let's tap the keg. The door's all right. Sixteen bulls couldn't kick it down, an' damn if I see much use in a double guard bein' kept on it night an' day."

Martin's opportunity came when the men suddenly took down the lantern and moved away. That they would be gone only a few moments was a certainty, and a man would have to hurry. Holding his breath with tension, Martin started easing through the hole. He could still hear fading foosteps when he reached the short ledge, but it was as dark as black cats now. He felt over the ledge and got a firm grip on it. With no time to waste, he swung himself outward.

All was well so far!

He was giving himself a backward swing when something snapped. It was the edge of the rock suddenly breaking with his weight. A fifty-pound chunk of it came away. He was in the air, going down and still trying to hold on to the rock when it swung out of his hands and came down on the floor of the passageway to splatter to pieces with the reverberating thunder of a cannon.

"What was that?" The distant voice came just as Martin landed on his feet. "Somethin's happened back there, Steeger!"

Footsteps were returning now, racing and stumbling along in a riot of noise. Martin leaped back, his hands pawing and fumbling rapidly along either side of the door. It looked as if he had gotten into something. The men had taken their rifles with them!

"It ain't nothin'!" The burly man behind his long-legged companion bellowed that. "Rock often falls in here!"

"Wasn't no ordinary fallin' rock this time!" shouted the man in the lead. "Somethin's happened."

MARTIN was desperate. There was no place to go. If he removed the heavy iron latches from over the door and got on the other side of it, that would be the first thing the men would see!

He scooted forward, hands raking the rock of the floor. He found two big chunks of the shattered stone and seized them eagerly. Then he broke into a light, noiseless run.

Light was already showing around the shoulder of a bend. He reached it just as the first man came tearing around it. The stone in Martin's right hand was ready. He sent it hurling forward. It was a miss of the leader's head by all of a foot, but the second man had suddenly popped into view with the lantern, and the flying stone struck him squarely on the forehead, knocking him down and putting him momentarily out of the fight.

Now it was war in the dark. The lantern had gone out. A six-shooter roared right in Martin's face, the bullet grazing his cheek as he tackled the first man. With a noisy scrape of falling bodies and ringing spurs, they went down, two wild cats raging in oily blackness.

The impact of the running man's body had carried Martin off his feet. He was down, underneath the man. The back of his head had struck the floor. The blow stunned him. For a few moments he did not know what he was doing, but he kept fighting instinctively.

A six-shooter struck for his head, grazed him on the side of it, and seemed to knock him back to full consciousness. His knees buckled then, and his feet came up. They

caught the man atop of him at either side of the stomach, and with a desperate shove-kick, Martin threw him hard against the wall.

Now it was really a grapple in the dark. Martin scrambled forward on his hands and knees. Another heavy stone struck his right palm and his hand closed on it. He struck just as the six-shooter fired again, and this time his blow drove straight to the side of the other man's head. He went down with a grunt, and Martin struck again.

It took but a moment for him to seize one of the man's six-shooters. Already he could hear the other man stirring. Without rising, just hunched forward there on one knee, Martin fired one shot to make a light in the darkness, and then fired again. There was a grunt, and the second man, already jerked to his feet and clawing for his six-shooters, pitched face forward on the floor of the passage with a bullet through his head.

Martin's old match case once more came into service. He struck a match, scurried forward, found the lantern and lighted it. Now he could see, but he was working with desperate haste. He picked up the rifles where the two men had dropped them. He disarmed each man, taking their belts and six-shooters, and then scooted to the door to throw it open.

He whistled into the darkness. There was no answer for a few moments. Only the noise of spilling water came to him. He whistled again, and then started shouting for the others to come—and to come in a hurry!

"Now, Prairie!" He whirled and ran back under the ledge. It was impossible to see anything up there because of the tilt of the hole, but Prairie Joy's head soon appeared. "Out on the ledge, quick! Swing down as far as you can. When you let go I'll catch you!"

SHE was out on the ledge when Flasher Buckhalter appeared in the doorway. For a second the man looked as if he was seeing something he was afraid to believe true, and then he was darting forward with others stringing along behind him.

"Glory be damned!" he yelled. "The dead's alive an' up an' a-rearin' to beat the band!"

Prairie Joy dropped then. Martin caught her, but her weight staggered him backward and against the wall. They went down together. It was only for a moment, and then —with men literally boiling out of the doorway of the Hell Hole—they started forward.

"Hell a-bellerin' bullsnakes!" Grandpa Johnny Joy was yelling a few minutes later. "Guns—an' plenty of 'em! Mine, Trigger's old scatter-puss, Prairie's—ever'body's just awaitin'."

They had reached the big room where Martin had regained consciousness. Behind a slab of rock against the wall was an arsenal, rifles, six-shooters, and belts loaded with ammunition. Flasher Buckhalter had been told to bring along the man who had been battered into unconsciousness with the rock.

"But there ain't no need of it!" he had protested. "He's as dead as the second one, Sam. Yuh musta spatted hell outa 'im!"

They were waiting now. They had already found the place. It was a wide balcony overlooking the valley. Here they would have a full sweep of the gunmen when they came. Here the war would be fought to a finish with no quarter given or any asked.

Linda Lou Joy suddenly changed their minds.

"If they're not here by dark, they won't come," she told them. "They've gone out of here to run down every Death Head man and woman, and they're out to bring them back here. If Gunner Pride keeps his promise, they'll find a young army of government men to fight when they open up on the ranch."

"Gunner Pride!" Everybody seemed to say the same words at the same time, but it was Grandpa Johnny who leaped ahead of them with the rest of it. "What . . . what's Gunner got to do with government fellas?"

"He's one of them," answered the girl. "All the time he's been making the rest of you think he was a crook. Trigger was so convinced of it he stabbed Gunner in the pantry last night."

"Trigger stabbed him?" Grandpa Johnny whirled upon the boy. "Why the hell—"

"I thought he was only playin' up to my sister, that's why!" the youth said doggedly. "I was in the stables last night an' heard her a-holdin' him to a promise. It didn't sound right to me. I didn't know until today that she knowed of this big drive comin' on, didn't know it then until Gunner got his senses back an' we found he's goin' to live all right. Gunner come here on the lookout for a couple of Gulver's men. He never could get his eye on 'em, but . . . but"—the boy rubbed his nose with his forearm and looked self-conscious—"he learned things, him an' Linda Lou. I'm sorry I stabbed 'im. Hell, Grandpa, Linda Lou's goin' to marry the son of a gun!"

"We'll see!" put in Prairie Joy. "Now that Sam Martin has found the Lost Sweetheart Mine—with more gold than we even dreamed of with all our fine imaginations—maybe Linda Lou will want to stay with us."

"Since Sam Martin did which?" roared Grandpa Johnny. "What's yuh sayin', young un? He—"

A rifle bullet answered him. It came flying out of a dense grove of pines below the ledge, a wailing, shrieking thing that flattened itself against the rocks overhead and dropped into a hot disk at their feet.

THEY came up like thunder, reeling, rocking in their saddles, hard pressed by swarms of men behind them on running horses. For the first time in years, Grandpa Johnny was seeing Buckhalters and Joys fighting side by side. And there were others among them, men who had belonged to neither side until now.

Goliath Gulver was in the lead, mounted on a powerful iron-gray. His shirt bosom was still open, wild hair flying like a burning bush. The others were trying to keep around him. All of them were still fighting. Once they reached the safety of the cliffs, they would hold all the advantage.

Martin started it. With a long rifle shot he lifted Gulver in his stirrups. A yell came from the giant. He fired two futile shots at the cliffs with his heavy .45s just as Martin caught him again over the sights of his rifle.

Now the giant seemed to stand in his saddle. His hands lifted. The Colt in the right hand slipped and fell. The other followed. Slowly, as if his dying legs were refusing to relax their grip on his horse, he heeled backward. The horse pitched crazily, and the giant was down, the dust boiling around him, horses thunder-

ing and stumbling over his body.

It was the end for all of them. They had been to the Death Head. They had struck it with all their fury. At the same time, others had fallen upon the Buckhalters like raging wolves rushing in to destroy everything before them. But it had been suicide. Strange men had appeared as if blown up from nowhere. At first the Buckhalters and Joys had fought them. It had not been for long. The strangers had made themselves known as friends—and then the real fighting had started.

Now the outlaws were in a trap of their own making. There was no way to turn back, no way to escape to the right nor left. They were caught without mercy, without quarter.

Up there on the ledge it was continuous gunfire. The smoke boiled. The spurting flames of rifles licked downward in lightning tongues. It was fast. Men died all too quickly until the last man was off his horse and rushing forward. Flasher Buckhalter's and Grandpa Johnny Joy's rifles spoke at the same time. The man stumbled to a halt, reeled, and went down, sprawling backward on the ground.

Martin turned away. The whole, slaughtering hell of it made him sick at his stomach. Grandpa Johnny and Flasher Buckhalter were still shooting—two bloodthirsty hellions who intended that there would not be even a sign of life left down there. For a moment Martin thought of returning to the Death Head, getting his horse, and putting the valley behind him. Hurried footsteps from behind halted him.

"Sam!" Prairie Joy caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

"I can't stand any more of it!" He exploded the words. "It's damned sickening, if you want the truth of it, Prairie!"

"Yes, I know—and I'm glad you feel that way, Sam. I . . . I couldn't think as much of you as I do if you felt otherwise about it."

She moved closer. Around them the powder smoke swirled, creeping, seeping upward, an acrid bite in the still air. Martin put his arms around her. There was no resistance. She slipped into his arms willingly, as if she had always belonged there, and the dying sounds of battle faded away from Sam Martin's consciousness.

THE END.

CACTUS BRANDED

BY HARRY F. OLMSTED

For the first time since he had taken over the desert parish of Gunsight Gap, more than a year ago, the Reverend Mortimer McBride set foot inside the big stone house of Jarvis Cryder. There was good reason why the sky pilot had kept away from the man who let it be known that: "Yonder psalm-singin' Bible wrangler better keep away from me if he expects to stay here. Yeah, an' not interfere with my business."

And now there was good reason why Mortimer McBride should ignore the threat. For Jarvis Cryder was dying.

Having been admitted to the gloomy hall by the Indian serving girl, Mortimer McBride paused. Through a doorway, across the room, came the low moan of the stricken man, followed by a girl's stifled sob.

"Please stop worrying, dad. It's all so useless, and it only makes you

worse. We've done all we can to locate Milt. No one has seen him, and he hasn't been at the ranch for over a week."

"Damn that boy, Milt!" Intolerance filled the weak tones of the dying man. "Damn his young soul to hell! Why don't he show up? He knows I'm hurt, must know it. Hell, everybody from Benson to the Border knows that Cinco Johnny beat me to the smoke an' rubbed me out, killed me. Milt knows it, too, but he won't come. He allus did cross me, that boy!"

"Dad, please."

Frozen there in the gloom, filled with pity for a savage man who had always been able to dominate everything but himself, Mortimer McBride visualized the girl kneeling at the bedside. Clean and fine and gentle, she had been one of the first to make herself known to him. She had volunteered to play the little organ at his services and had assumed a vital part in building up the church. And she had worked just as unselfishly, just as bravely, to help the two previous pastors, good men both, but, like himself, quite unequal to the task of leaving a mark upon the granite hardness of these range men.

Jarvis Cryder continued his tantrum. "Don't tell me what to do, daughter. If I can't see that wild whelp of mine before I pass out, I'll have my say anyway. I know how you've tried to stick up for Milt, but it's no use. He's no good. Ain't worth a plugged centavo. I never should have interfered when they had him up for killin' that gamblin' man in Tucson. Why, he's even robbed me, rustled beef from the outfit he expects to inherit. He's gambled every cent he could squeeze out of me. Well, here's payoff. I'll leave him nothin', nary a dime. I only hope I go to the deepest canyon of hell, so's when he comes I can cuss him out in a lingo he'll understand!"

MORTIMER McBRIDE'S rugged jaw tightened and he stepped into the sickroom. The girl made a queer little sound and rose from the bedside. Jarvis Cryder glared at the parson, his eyes already clouding, his vision filmed. He gasped for breath, but he was fighting off the clutch of death just as he had fought for his leadership here.

Across the bed, grizzled Dr. Venable sat looking at his patient, a resigned look on his face. Too well he knew this violent man, too well he knew the uselessness of remonstrance. He didn't even look up as McBride came to the foot of the bed, his eyes unwaveringly on the face of the sick man.

"Well," grated Cryder, "what the hell do you want?"

"I came," Mortimer McBride said gently, "because you need me. And I find you cursing a son you should be praying for. Steady, Mr. Cryder. If you die, as you seem to think you will, God will not judge you on what you leave behind, but upon what is in your heart. Milt Cryder's life is before him. He must face responsibilities when you're gone that you have failed to prepare him for. Have you thought, sir, that you may be the one at fault? Will you not let me pray for you?"

Jarvis Cryder tried to sit up, his face swelling until it seemed about to burst. His pale eyes shot fire and his long, gray mustache quivered with his passion. He leveled a trembling finger.

"Hear me, you fawnin' hypocrite!" he bellowed. "You take yore prayers an' sanctimony out o' my house.

Get out! Stay away from me, you hear? You're worse than this bullet in my guts. I've lived hard, McBride, an' I'll die the same way—without yore help. I ain't scairt to die. Can't understand that, can you? It's because you're a weaklin', livin' in fear, masqueradin' as a man behind a sky pilot's collar an' a mealy-mouthed gospel!"

"What I am doesn't matter, Mr. Cryder."

"It does so matter. You hate my guts because I'm a sinner. All right, I hate you for a weakling lookin' for somethin' soft an' easy. Get out o' here, McBride, an' get out of Gunsight Gap. The desert is strong, an' it smiles only upon the strong. It has its own gospel—blessed is he who shoots first. Savvy? That's a creed to tie to."

"You tied to it, Mr. Cryder. What good is it to you now?"

"More good than your preachin', McBride. Get out o' my sight. Take yore sour-faced speeches away an' go to hell. Git out!"

The parson's face went white, and he caught the warning glance of Viola Cryder as her father fell back against the pillow, exhausted. Torn with a sense of new failure, McBride lowered his head, turned away and left the room. It rankled that these hard-shelled people tolerated him, offered him courtesy of a sort, yet underneath must feel exactly as did this bitter, dominant man they had elevated to leadership. That Jarvis Cryder alone expressed his scorn reflected the very qualities that had made him their leader. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

OPENING the front door softly, Mortimer McBride was about to pass outside when Viola Cryder called him. "Mr. McBride. Please."

He turned and she came to him, her eyes wet with tears. "I'm terribly sorry about everything," she said miserably. "But dad is hardly responsible—" Suddenly she gave way to convulsive sobs and McBride laid his hand comfortingly on her shoulder.

"Steady, Viola. Your father is not to blame. The fault is mine that I do not find his ground to stand on, his language to speak. His way is the desert's way. I am flesh and blood; he's rock and sand and cactus. We just can't get together."

"He's had to fight so terribly hard," she murmured. "It's all he understands. One has to fight here, Mr. McBride, whether he runs a ranch, a saloon, or . . . or a church. I . . . I wanted to tell you that."

She turned away, went back into the sickroom. McBride went down the shrub-lined walk and, at the gate, almost collided with a man who swung the panel wide and lurched through. He was a young man, half a head taller than the parson, and a lot unsteady as he eyed him. Milt Cryder had come home—drunk. He stepped back from McBride, laughing loosely.

"H'are yuh, Bible buster; been in to see dad, eh? How's he doin'? They tell me he's set to croak. Ain't you learned you can't pray a slug out of a man's belly?"

"Your father is very low, Milt," said the parson. "And he's calling for you. Maybe you better drink some strong coffee, straighten up and go—"

"Straighten up? What for? He don't go for me, anyway, so he might's well see me like this. Had two-three drinks, is all. I'm all right." A scowl creased his gaunt face. "If dad dies, I'll hunt up this Cinco gent an' square the account. That breed ain't gonna get away

with killin' a Cryder. Well, I'll be seein' you, parse."

He reeled aside, stumbling along the path. Mortimer McBride strode after him, whirled him about. "No, Milt, you mustn't go to him like this. It may be the last time you ever see your father. Come on with me and we'll get you in better shape."

"Turn loose of me!" Milt struggled free and would have continued on to the house had not McBride caught and held him.

"Listen, Milt. Your sister's in there. Do you want her to see you like this? Come home with me and I'll—"

But Milt Cryder wouldn't hear him out. His nature, violent as his father's, exploded. He struck the parson's hands away with a downstroke of his left arm, then smashed his right fist to Mortimer McBride's jaw, knocking him down.

The blow dazed the parson, left him helpless for a few moments. When he scrambled up and raced after Milt the youngster was entering the house. He left the door open behind him and the parson distinctly heard the brief—very brief—exchange within. Milt's cocky:

"H'are yuh, sis. Well, dad, you old war horse—"

"Milt!" Viola's cry cut off his words. "Thank God you've come."

"You damn young bla'guard!" The springs creaked as Jarvis Cryder reared up in bed. "Where you bin? Out raisin' more hell, I betcha, an'— Ah-h-h-h!"

His voice tailed out into a queer, rattling moan. Viola screamed. The old medico cautioned: "Careful, Jarv!" Then there was only silence, during which Milt backed into the hall, all his bluster gone.

Mortimer McBride waited no longer. Somehow he knew that the old man was dead, and the knowledge left him only with an increased sense of his own impotence here. If any man had ever needed spiritual help, Jarvis Cryder had. He, Mortimer McBride, had failed him, and the reason for that failure was just an increment to his already burdensome bewilderment.

NIGHT was falling and the hot breeze from the desert was moderating. Lights were winking on in the town, but somehow in his present mood they repelled Mortimer McBride. He turned at the gate, followed the dusty street out into the great flat vastness, where he could be alone. Unmindful of his steps, he quit the road, striding swiftly through untracked aisles of cactus, catclaw and creosote. And he was thinking of his dream—to one day rear a fine stone church in Gunsight Gap, with a tall belfry from which he could summon the faithful. A capitol of peace!

Peace! He saw the fallacy of that dream now. Peace in the desert was loneliness. Contacts here were violent, and it seemed as if God must have willed it so. McBride sat down on a shelf of lava rock where, one day, the very earth here had writhed with violence. The moon came up, big and red and round, to flood the desert with a peaceful light. But it came to Mortimer McBride then how false that peacefulness was.

From afar off, a coyote pair sent their weird hunting call trembling upon the night air. Somewhere near there was the sudden rush of some night quester, a sharp squeal of terror, then the silence of death. A mosquito came singing about Mortimer McBride's head, seeking his blood. In striking at it he punctured his hand on an unfriendly thorn of an overhanging catclaw frond. This

was the desert—grim, unfriendly, always at war.

Here life was maintained only at the price of eternal vigilance, or by overmatching savagery. The songless birds of the desert air lived by mandible and talon. The beasts by claw and fang. Reptiles and insects were armored, short-tempered, venomous. The underbrush and trees were sparse of foliage, scaly barked and thorned. The rocks bore cutting edges. The sun burned down with hammerlike strokes and the wind pelted everything with volleys of sand.

Yes, for the first time, Mortimer McBride saw the desert in proper perspective. Whatever lived here did so only because it adapted itself to an inhospitable setting, accepted the desert's challenge and battled for the right to remain. Man, the most adaptable of animals and the most savage, fought hardest. How could there be brotherhood here, where the struggle was so intense?

Mortimer McBride came up, dejection in every line of his body. What could he hope to do in the face of so vast, so profound a principle? He wanted to pray for strength, but also he wanted to cry out against all this barren land stood for—its savagery, its violence, its strength that seemed to magnify his weaknesses.

Discouraged, he walked back to town. The silence of waiting was over and done. Word had gone out that Jarvis Cryder was dead. Violence, long held in check by the old leader's domination, would flare with redoubled intensity. Lesser men would battle for the mantle of leadership. The strange thought came to Mortimer McBride that it might be his opportunity to take the reins and guide the disorganized citizens along a saner, more peaceful path. The thought excited only a bitter humor in the parson. A holy man leading wicked Gunsight Gap! That was a ludicrous, impossible picture.

THE whole range turned out for Jarvis Cryder's funeral. Mortimer McBride tried to preach a moral over the casket. "He who taketh up the sword," he told them, "by the sword shall he perish." Men stood uncovered, listening courteously, yet he knew it was going over their heads. They were armored against such preachments, just as the desert flora was armored against the onslaught of the sand.

He saw Viola Cryder weeping silently, with scowling, restless Milt at her side. He noted the studious air of the solid men of the town, and somehow knew they were thinking less of the moral side of this tragedy than of its effect upon their businesses. One man in particular caught the parson's attention—Dan Scarlett.

Yesterday Scarlett was only one of many gamblers and saloonmen, laying claim only to ownership of the Roaring Hour Saloon. Yesterday he had operated in accordance with rules of tithing laid down by Jarvis Cryder. But today there was a change in him. He seemed to have increased in stature. His fancy broadcloth and shiny Russian boots seemed more impressive. His jaw seemed firmer and his black eyes flashed an unwonted challenge, backed up by the three grim, gunhung satellites behind him.

When Mortimer McBride had spoken the concluding words and consigned the body to the ground, Scarlett took on a sympathetic smile, stepped up to Viola Cryder and tendered his arm. Yesterday he would not have dared, but today Jarvis Cryder was dead.

Time dragged on. Hot days made hotter for the townsmen because of the fiery debates taking place on every corner. Noisy, violent nights, with many a conflict as men defended their choice of a champion to succeed Jarvis Cryder. Slowly but surely the town was splitting into two important factions, one supporting Dan Scarlett, the other holding out for Milt Cryder. Scarlett waged his campaign in the Roaring Hour over glasses of free whiskey. Milt held a more vengeful support by his demand that Sheriff Murch Appleton turn over Cinco Johnny, slayer of his father. Partisanship was about equally divided, with all the signs pointing toward open conflict. And Sheriff Appleton moved down to the jail with his deputies, keeping close watch on the town and on his prisoner, who was being held for the next session of circuit court.

And so Sunday morning dawned. A little bewildered by the rampant spirit of disaster, Mortimer McBride tolled the little bell in front of the church. Later, shaken and at a loss for words, he stood before his little congregation of women and children, with its sparse sprinkling of men, and assigned the opening hymn. And while they stood and sang, he was more concerned with the types and their behavior than with the song.

There were a few cowmen present, stiffly uncomfortable in their Sunday best. Their wives and women of the town, neat and attractive in their freshly starched ginghams. An officer and his wife, over from Fort Huachuca. A mine superintendent, down from the Buckskin Hills. Jovial Sheriff Appleton, looking ruddy and pleased with himself as he sat beside his buxom wife. And, most surprising, notorious Dan Scarlett and one of his bodyguards, from the Roaring Hour. Viola Cryder, in from the Circle C Ranch, was at the organ.

The sheriff sang lustily in his robust bass, but none of the other men took part. Instead, they kept casting covert glances toward the street, as if they waited for some signal. And Viola—Mortimer McBride wondered why she sat so stiffly, so pale and taut, while she played. What was it?

The last strains of the hymn died and the parson lifted his sheet of announcements. It was then that the front doors crashed open and a man came bursting into the church.

"Murch—sheriff!" he bawled. "Where are yuh at?"

The lawman stood up. "Here, Matt!" He touched his wife on the arm and stepped into the aisle. "What's wrong?"

"Hurry," urged the man called Matt. "You're needed."

The sheriff strode up the aisle, joining Matt. Together they moved to the door, Matt whispering excitedly. As they passed outside, a townswoman at the rear cried out wildly:

"Heaven help us all! They're taking Cinco Johnny out of jail to hang him. I heard them talking."

There was instant confusion. Everyone was on his feet and the church buzzed with talk. There was a quick movement toward the exit, with the mining man bawling something about: "Stay in here, you fools! There may be bullets flying. You can't do anything about it. That's the sheriff's business."

It failed to halt the stampede. And Mortimer McBride, a little frightened and a whole lot bewildered, stepped out of the pulpit and moved after them. He was not yet at the door when some of his congregation came surging in again,

women choking back screams and wrestling with fear.

"They've got him," the parson heard the whisper, "and they've got the sheriff, too. They're hanging a man on the Sabbath."

WHITE-FACED, Mortimer McBride threaded his way between insurging women, and so came to the church steps. Even before he looked up the street, where the ugly mob note grew by the minute, the parson saw the two gamblers standing to one side, their eyes riveted upon the spectacle with vast relish.

Someone cried: "This is awful! Somebody has got to stop it."

Somebody! And, strangely, they were looking at Mortimer McBride, their leader. McBride, the failure, the weakest one among them. Begging him to halt the violence of desert man, where natural laws seemed to hang upon violence. They were crazy; he was crazy. The whole pattern of this land was insane.

McBride caught Viola's eyes upon him, pleading. Somehow that did something to him. Then he turned his eyes along the street, where two riflemen held the sheriff and his two deputies under their guns. A crowd of marching men moved between the walks with the slender, scornfully smiling Cinco Johnny in their midst, a rope about his neck. Dust boiled up under the beat of their boots, and the *tramp, tramp, tramp* was ominous in the sudden silence.

Mortimer McBride, numb to the normal emotions as he reflected upon the tragedy so soon to happen, found himself moving. He couldn't have told what prompted him to stride into the street to face that oncoming phalanx. Certainly he had no idea as to what he could do to stem the tide. He paused, chill-faced, his hand upraised in a signal for them to halt. A jeer ran through the mob.

"Look at what's tryin' to stop it," laughed someone. "Parse don't like it."

"Fall in, sky boy!" roared another. "There's work for you, prayin' Cinco's soul out of hell's fires—an' I mean work."

"Boys, boys!" Mortimer McBride hardly recognized his own voice. "I plead with you not to do this. Come to your senses—"

Good-natured enough toward him, they infolded him, buffeting him from hand to hand until he found himself beside the doomed man, Cinco Johnny. Hemmed there, as if by a fence of steel, he marched beside the little killer, straight and pale and terribly stern. Exactly as if he was the one slated for the hang noose. At his side, Cinco scoffed.

"Church is yore place, parse," he sneered. "Why ain't you got sense enough to stay where you belong? If you stick out yore neck, somebody's goin' to put a rope around it, shore. Yo're white as paper, parse. Plumb scairt, ain't yuh? Better preach yoreself a sermon, feller, but save the wind yo're storin' up for me. I don't need it. I ain't scairt to die."

"You're not going to die, Cinco!" Mortimer McBride ground out the promise without turning his head. And, for all the bitterness of this moment, he found room for admiration. There really was something fine in the courage of this little killer. With some of that, he reflected, he might be able to drive a wedge into the hard rock of these desert dwellers.

"I suppose you'll stop 'em, eh?" scoffed Cinco Johnny.

"I'll stop them," said Mortimer McBride, though for the life of him he didn't know how.

Slog, slog, slog! Pounding boots echoing from the false fronts. A breathless silence holding the town in its clammy grip. Dust rolling from under the feet of vengeful men. Some of the bolder townsfolk matching the pace along the walks. Others shrinking back into doorways or peering from windows, fearful, horrified. And so the five-minute jury came to the big cottonwood that shaded the road at the west end of the town.

The man-ring seemed to open, to spew Cinco Johnny under the great horizontal limb of the tree. Milt Cryder, clearly drunk, strode forth, grinning cruelly.

"What we waiting for, men?" he demanded thickly. "Toss that hemp over the limb an' let's get it over with." And while the one who held the lariat was making the cast, Milt faced Cinco Johnny. "You killed my dad, you bushwhackin' coyote!" he rasped. "You murdered the best man in this town, an old man who one time could have given you cards, spades an' big casino an' beat you to the draw every day in the week. Yeah, an' twice on Sunday. This is payoff, Cinco, with no smart shyster to get you off with a few years in jail—"

"Murder, hell!" Cinco stood up to him. "That ornery old man of yores gimme more hell than I've ever took off a man. But when I bowed up an' told him off he couldn't take it. He went to the smoke. I spotted the old devil the draw before plenty witnesses, an' beat him to the shot by a mile. Damn good riddance, I call it. But at that, Jarv Cryder was a plenty solid man alongside of the whiskey-swillin' whelp he called his son. You rigged up this party, Milt, an' I hope you have a lot of fun. But when you come to hell, it's me an' you for it!"

MILT recoiled from the fearless venom of the little killer, his face purpling. And, through the silence as they waited for his answering outburst, the deadly whir of a rattlesnake sounded, scattering one side of the gathering. Somewhere a man cursed, drew as he leaped. A gun roared and the sibilant cascabels were silenced. It served to rouse Mortimer McBride from the spell that had handcuffed him. He shuddered. Here was the desert's savage humor again. A man had just been forced to fight for his life in order to witness a lynching. He remembered Viola's pointed warning the evening her father died.

"One has to fight here, Mr. McBride," she had said, "whether he runs a ranch, a saloon, or a church. I wanted to tell you that."

He had simply heard her words then. But now they assumed a meaning. Fight. He would have to fight to make a success of his church. He must fight if he wanted to break up this grim party. The man who withdrew from a fight was weakened for the next test, he saw that plainly now. Why, even the Master had fought to clear the temple of its money changers. Moved by a tremendous impulse, Mortimer McBride strode past Cinco Johnny, laid his hand on the rope that had just fallen across the hang limb.

"Give me this!" he said commandingly.

The man with the rope bellowed: "Get back outa this, parse, or—"

McBride knocked him sprawling and turned to face Milt Cryder. Those hard men stared at him as if they could not trust their eyes. Cinco laughed brittlely.

"Mind what I told you about sticking out yore neck, parse. Now I'll have company—"

"Shut up!" Mortimer McBride

snapped. And then, without having taken his eyes from Milt's face: "Cryder," he said, "this affair is your doing—yours alone. If you insist on going through with it you're the one who'll pay."

"Don't you preach to me, damn yuh!" Milt blustered. "Get back to your—"

"I'm not here to preach," said the parson, a startling ring to his voice, "but to stop you. They tell me you're quite a gambler."

"To hell with that, McBride! You get out o' this or—"

"Well," broke in Mortimer McBride, "here's a gamble for you. I'm betting you the best beating you've ever had that you don't lead this hanging." He peeled off his coat, tossed it to waiting hands in the crowd. For the moment a grim spectacle had given way to one of humor. McBride could read it in their faces.

Someone hollered: "There's a bet, Milt. You done talked up this deal; le's see you play it out."

"You?" Milt Cryder stared at the parson. "You fight?"

"As many of you as I have to, Milt. If you hang Cinco, you've got to put me down—for keeps. Well?"

Milt was laughing harshly, doffing his coat and rolling his sleeves. "That's a hot one, ain't it? Give us room, boys."

He came shuffling in, his fists cocked. And Mortimer McBride felt a fierce pleasure surge through him, a joy that banished whatever fear he might have had. For the mob spirit was melting away; he could feel it leave. And there was hope it could not be rekindled.

MILT rushed him now, steering a wild swing. Desperately anxious to make a good fight, McBride came in rather than back away. Milt's fist cracked against his jaw, dropping him. The big-boned youngster stood threateningly over him, daring him to rise. And that the parson did, swinging as he came up. For a full minute they stood head to head, punching. Then Mortimer McBride went down again. And Milt was backing away from him, dashing blood from his split lips.

The parson came up slowly, fuzzy-brained, but stung and more determined. Milt met his attack with a swing that missed and McBride smashed him in the mouth again and again. This hard-baked scion of a granite-hard sire was softening up—after a few punches. In every line he showed his failing appetite for conflict.

McBride pressed him relentlessly, giving him no time to get set, making him miss. Milt's breath came gustingly now, and with great effort. His arms were wearying, his blows losing steam. And the parson was making a mess of his face. Once more he hit his despised foe on the jaw, but this time McBride didn't go down. He didn't even feel those weakening blows. He kept right on top of his taller, heavier adversary, driving solid, bony knuckles into his face, his belly and his ribs.

Now Milt wasn't even fighting back. His face was a bloody smear and he covered his head with his curled arms. Mortimer McBride drew those arms down with a flurry of hard shots to the midriff. Then Milt's gory lips were exposed, making a fair target. The parson struck with his right—a stiff, jolting blow that knocked the younger man's head back, that dumped him on the ground. Then McBride stood there puffing hard, the roar of the mob sweet music in his ears. For the first time since alighting from the coach

that day he arrived in Gunsight Gap he knew satisfaction, confidence.

Milt Cryder shook his head, rose and charged like a mad bull. One of his wild swings caught the parson alongside the head, turning his knees to water. Another took him in the side, spinning him around. His brain was full of shooting red flames and he fought back instinctively. Milt's face swam before his distorted vision, a savage, bloody mask. McBride was hurt, and he knew it, yet there was no sensible pain. Only a fierce joy.

He gave ground, covering. The roaring subsided in his ears and he heard the shouts of the mob. Unbelievable, the words they were speaking. They were cheering him on.

"Stay with him, Sky boy."

"Come on, parse! Give it back to him."

"Don't give him too much rope, McBride. Hang one onto his chin."

Mortimer McBride shook the last of the fog from his brain. His senses were sharp and clear now and he halted his retreat. Milt closed, swung a clumsy, clubbing effort that wrapped itself about the parson's neck. McBride brought his right up between them—a full uppercut that crashed against Milt's chin, lifting his feet from the earth, tipping him backward and smashing him to the ground. Pain ran along McBride's arm as he stepped back. Milt made a convulsive turning movement that left him face down. And there he lay—unconscious.

A wild yell broke from the watchers, and loudest of the lot was that from the lips of Cinco Johnny. But the parson found no joy in their adulation, in the hand-pumping and back-slapping that followed. He was looking down at the man he had beaten, and he was thinking of the trail ahead, the payoff. And through his thoughts roved an undeniable sense of power.

The mob grew silent, expectant. Mortimer McBride turned to Cinco Johnny, took the noose from about his neck. Then, running his eyes about the circle of faces, he said, "I'd take him back to the sheriff if I were you, boys. Like you and me, he's entitled to a fair court trial."

It was spoken gently enough, but there was a difference. This was an order and they obeyed. Someone helped Milt to his feet, led him down to the horse trough to wash away the blood. And still quite a crowd hung around the preacher, who reclaimed his coat, donned it and wiped sweat from his face.

"Boys," he said, "I've got a sermon to preach, one that will be good for you to hear. Fall in behind me and we'll all go to church."

There was no demurring. Two by two, they followed him, passed between the ranks of staring women and children and so into the church. Soon afterward, the sheriff came in to join his wife. His two deputies came in, with bruised and sullen Milt between them. The little house of worship was jammed. It was the biggest congregation Gunsight Gap had ever known.

MORTIMER McBRIDE'S heart was singing as he stood at the pulpit, looking down at them. They were his people now, and he knew it. His eyes, for one brief moment, went to the window, regarding the far stretch of the desert beyond the town. Somehow, it was changed. Sun-drenched, dry, barren, as usual, it seemed to be smiling at him.

Without preliminaries of hymn or announcement, McBride commenced to preach. Nor was it the sermon he had prepared. He compared the

men of Gunsight Gap to boys, led astray by false prophets and improper example. He reminded them that experience is a hard teacher, yet a just one. The morning's confusion had brought home a lesson to all concerned, one they could draw upon in the future, for guidance. Looking right at Sheriff Appleton, he stressed the virtue of forgiveness and promised a greater orderliness if the law would overlook the morning's happenings.

It was a practical sermon, brought down close to the ground and couched in words these homely folk understood. It held them and, reading their faces, Mortimer McBride knew that he had won them to his side, that he would, henceforth, be given a place in their councils and his chance to lead them. It was a miracle. He had fought the good fight and the scramble for the cloth of Jarvis Cryder's leadership was done. He was one with them—and with the desert.

When it was over, they crowded up to shake his hand. The sheriff came up to admit that he had driven the law with too loose a rein, that he was overlooking the jail delivery and putting all those who had taken part under indefinite probation. Milt Cryder, bruised and shame-faced, was one of the last to shake hands with McBride. He was cold sober now, shamed and penitent.

"I've been a fool, parse, in figgerin' you for a weakling an' me as the hell-roarin' jigger best fitted to rod this range. My dad left the ranch to sis, an' plumb right he was. I'll be too busy ramroddin' the spread for her to get myself into any more messes in town. Thanks for . . . for knockin' some sense into me."

He turned and strode resolutely outside. Mortimer McBride smiled after him and Viola came over to stand beside him, her eyes glistening with tears. It was then that Dan Scarlett moved up to beam upon her. He bowed low.

"I'll be pleased, Miss Viola, to see you home." Patronizingly, he laid his hand on her arm. McBride reached out and brushed it away.

"Sorry, Scarlett, but I've already attended to the matter of seeing the lady home." He would not have dared yesterday. But this was today, his day. The gambler turned a dry smile upon him.

"You're not so dumb, parse," he murmured. "More power to you in runnin' this town. You can't do worse than those you follow. Good luck; you'll need it." And he was on his way out and the church seemed to echo to Jarvis Cryder's chuckle.

THE END.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

Tension had long existed between the United States and Mexico and while each side had legitimate grievances, Mexico always either avoided arbitration of difficulties or refused outright to make any attempt to settle them.

On May 10, 1846, Congress declared a state of war to exist between the United States and the Republic of Mexico. Ten million dollars was voted for the conduct of the war, and the President was authorized to raise an army of fifty thousand men. One of the divisions was known as the "Army of the West."

Shortly after war was declared, Colonel W. S. Kearny, following orders from Washington, took about seventeen hundred dragoons and Missouri volunteers and entered Mexico by way of the Santa Fe Trail. He met with no resistance and, on arriving at Santa Fe, declared the territory of New Mexico a

part of the United States, and appointed Charles Bent the first governor.

Having taken New Mexico without the firing of a single shot, Kearny continued on toward California. A few days out from Santa Fe, he met Kit Carson who was bearing dispatches for Washington and bringing the news that California had been occupied by the American navy. On August 17th, Commodore Robert F. Stockton proclaimed California a territory of the United States and made Captain John C. Fremont, whose career will be dealt with later, military commander.

On September 14, 1847, an American force under General Scott entered Mexico City. Mexican leaders saw that there was no use in prolonging the struggle, but it was not until February 2, 1848, that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, fixing the international boundary along the Rio Grande to New Mexico, thence west along the Gila to the Colorado, and from that point along the boundary of Lower and Upper California to the Pacific. The United States was to pay fifteen million dollars for the ceded territory and assume liability for claims of American citizens against Mexico to an amount not to exceed three million two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Thus was added to the United States more than half a million square miles, representing more than one-sixth of the area of continental United States.

NEXT WEEK: COLONISTS IN UTAH

HIGH LOW TAKES THE DEAL

BY MOJAVE LLOYD

High Low watched his helper, Hop Gow, depart for the night, waited patiently till the last customer had left, then locked, barred, bolted and chained the door of his little Ivory Duck Café. This done, he scuttled for the kitchen where he blew out the light in the tin wall lamp and, for a moment, stood rigidly still. But except for miners' boots clumping on the plank walk outside, and the muffled pulsing of

blast furnaces that had been the undertone of his life for so long, his straining senses detected no sound. He moved, then, as quietly and easily as though he could see his way in the dark.

At the edge of a section of shelving holding chinaware, between the old cast-iron cookstove and the table, High Low located a narrow crack. Into this he inserted long fingernails and pulled gently. The whole section swung on a concealed pivot. High Low slipped through, swung the shelving back in place, then stood rigid again, poised, listening. He had heard a gunshot.

This scarcely disturbed High Low. He hadn't operated his little Ivory Duck in the lawless mining town of Eureka, Nevada, for twenty years without becoming accustomed to the raucous curses of men and the crackle and blare of gunfire. Besides, the placid Oriental was immune to excitement. No, it was for other sounds that he listened in the inky darkness behind the chinaware shelves—sinister sounds.

Hearing nothing suspicious, he went to work, busy as a squirrel in a hole. But although outwardly impassive, there was, deep within his celestial soul, a veritable fountain of heavenly joy. It was the greatest night of High Low's life, the night for which he had slaved and planned and scraped, down through the unceasing toil of twenty dragging years. It was the night when he would hug to his heart the flowering of his cherished dream.

When he lit the stub of a candle, the guttering light revealed that he was in a tiny windowless cubbyhole where he slept nightly curled on a mat. Doubling back the mat, he raised a hinged piece of floor board, and out of a secret cavern beneath lifted a small brass-bound camphorwood box, singularly heavy for its size. Then he squatted down on the mat wth the box on his lap, reverently lifted the lid and allowed his shiny agate eyes to feast on the contents. A blissful expression crept over his thin face until an indistinct sound in the alley stiffened him.

But when the sound wasn't repeated, he went to work for the thousandth time, counting the heap of gold coins the little box contained. First, however, he removed an ancient ugly little bronze Buddha from the top of the heap and placed it lovingly on a shelf.

It was no wonder the nerves of High Low were tense that Friday night. The little camphorwood box contained twelve hundred and fifty dollars, exactly the sum required to bring out from China his only son. When he thought of that son, his wizened face assumed a mystic look. A son to work side by side with his father down the years, to care for his father when the pains of age came upon him, and at the last to inherit the little Ivory Duck and pay due respect to the bones of his ancestors.

HIGH LOW sat with polished yellow coins between his supple fingers and let his mind wander pleasantly back down the years that were gone. His son would be twenty-one years old now, just the age High Low himself had been when he departed so hopefully from faraway Foochow, leaving a wife and baby to mourn him. Several years later the wife and mother had died. The child had been raised by others. And now High Low was to have him.

Tomorrow High Low would go to the bank and pay over the hoardings of twenty years for a piece of paper they would send away for him, together with a letter. And then, almost before he knew it, the banker

friend had told him, he would have his son. High Low shivered—first with ecstasy, and then, an instant later, with mortal fear. Shrill and clear, piercing the night, rose a Chinese scream.

In three breaths High Low had his agate eyes glued to a corner of the glass in the front door of his café, for the first time in twenty years forgetting to replace the camphorwood chest and swing the china shelves back. What he saw left him stunned. He couldn't have moved a muscle if the good Buddha himself had commanded it.

Down the middle of the rutted street zigzagged a flying figure whose flaring trousers and black sateen coat flapped grotesquely in the night wind. He was abreast of the Ivory Duck when his next scream was choked off by the venomous roar of a six-shooter. He pitched on his face. His sandals made queer little kicking motions, as if trying to stay on his feet, then he lay still. High Low shut his eyes.

When he pried them open again, a shaggy miner in a red shirt was rolling the inert form over. A tall man with a smoking gun in his hand came stalking down the street, carefully avoiding the ruts cut by heavy freight wagons. The hidden High Low recognized with a shudder the frock-coated figure of one of his steadiest customers, a dangerous man who would hazard ten thousand on one flip of a card, or shoot a man just to watch his toes dance.

"Dead?" the frock-coated man inquired laconically of the miner.

"As a doornail!" grunted the other.

"Just wondered," drawled the gambler. "Always hate to waste a second shot on a chink." He turned with careless grace, and the miner at his elbow started to retrace his steps.

"He bite you or something, Slash?" the miner asked.

"Lost his roll," Slash Breen replied carelessly. "As he went out, it looked like he was pulling a knife, so I potted him. Got a match?"

The notorious card sharp lit a cigar with steady fingers and strolled leisurely back to the Golden Horn Saloon.

High Low knew that never in his life did that harmless little figure lying in the rutted street draw a knife. And well did he know it was as much as his life was worth even to venture forth at such a time in a town where miners on a spree considered a Chinaman ideal for target practice. But as soon as a few curious idlers had glanced at the fallen man and drifted on, he slipped out and dragged his countryman inside.

BURLY Doc McPherson was spread-eagled on the floor, snoring peacefully with his head in the wastebasket, when High Low slid into his office and managed to get him into his bullhide swivel chair. From a black bottle on the desk, the little Chinaman filled a tumbler half full of whiskey and handed it to the doctor.

"Be ye high, be ye low—High Low," rumbled McPherson, with a twinkle in his maudlin eyes, "ye are a mon f'r all that!" He thumped the little Chinaman affectionately on the back of his faded alpaca jacket. "How y'r boy?"

High Low's agate eyes shone. "Come along China plenty good!" he grinned.

He hadn't got far with his story of recent happenings before Rory McPherson shoved to his feet with a lunge that sent the lamp flame fluttering. A subtle change came

over the burly man. His hands steadied, his steel-blue eyes cleared, the burr of his boyhood left his tongue. Hard-drinking, profane, fearing neither man nor devil, he attacked the pain and the grief and the sickness that surrounded him with a furious energy that made him beloved.

He knelt on the floor in the Ivory Duck, turned the limp Chinaman's bloody face down, and explored the base of the skull with gnarled, gentle fingers. He shook his grizzled head.

"Bullet lodged right up against the brain," he muttered. "You savvy?"

"Savvy plenty good!" whispered High Low. "How can do?"

"*Can't* do, you pig-tailed soup-strainer!" grumbled the physician half to himself. "There's but one man in the whole blasted Nevada territory dare touch a job like this, a brain specialist I hear's over in Carson City. His name's Graham. I know the feller. I should. Married the girl I wanted. Hope he croaks. Got any liquor?"

High Low grabbed a bottle from a shelf. With the whiskey, McPherson skillfully washed the ugly wound and made a closer examination. He began to hum through his teeth, a sure sign that he was growing interested in the case.

"What with blood and dirt," he complained, "this jasper's face don't look like one I've seen before. You know him?"

"Plenty good!" High Low said softly. "Him Fong Wick, my bes' flend. Fog Wick an' High Low come along China long time go, allee same ship."

"Damn!" muttered Doc McPherson. He straightened up and absent-mindedly stuffed the bottle in his pocket. "It might work. But I couldn't do it!"

"Man can do?" asked High Low eagerly.

"*What* man can do?" growled the absorbed surgeon. "Oh, you mean that wowser Graham over to Carson? By damn, I bet he could!" He shook his grizzled head again.

"No good, High," he grumbled. "Graham's a big high mucky-muck in New York. He only happens to be in Nevada to look into some of his mining investments. It's said he won't turn his cuffs back for less than a thousand dollars on the barrel head. Besides that, expenses for hospital and the like would knock hell out of another five hundred. What in damnation's bit you?"

High Low was wriggling around as though attacked by an army of ants. He was wringing his hands, rolling his eyes, tying and untying the black ribbon bow at the end of his cue. Fear convulsed him. In the excitement over the shooting of Fong Wick, he had forgotten all about his precious gold hoard, the gold that was to bring his son from China. He disappeared like a shot.

He found his hoarded wealth right where he'd left it and he stood there for several minutes gazing fixedly at the ugly bronze Buddha. Then he carefully stowed it and the gold away again and returned to the front. But in that short space of time it had come to High Low what the spirit of his ancestors required him to do.

The hoardings from twenty years of constant toil must go. If he was never again able to get together enough to bring his beloved son from China, well, then, so the Spirit willed. Fong Wick must be saved. He scurried back to his cubbyhole, then returned and hesitantly placed his little camphorwood casket in the hands of the astonished doctor. The shriveled shoulders inside the shabby old alpaca jacket squared proudly.

"Can happen!" he murmured. "High Low no need money." He bobbed his head toward the still form of his closest friend. "You take'm Carson?"

"Holy hopscotch!" snorted McPherson, standing there counting the money. "Twelve hundred and fifty!" He knit his beetling brows and a fighting light began to glow in his steely eyes.

"Damned if I don't do it!" he ripped out. "If this ain't enough money I'll put the rest up myself." A wave of energy swept over him. He glanced at his watch. "The midnight stage'll be through in twenty minutes, High. I'll take Fong Wick to Carson myself. Graham'll work on him if I have to stand over him with a bullwhip. You got a wheelbarrow?"

"Plenty good!" cackled High Low. He was dancing in his sandals, his gimlet eyes shining.

"Fill it full of blankets," ordered the doctor. "I'll be back in a minute. We can just get Fong to the station in time. Scoot!"

WHEN the heavy old Concord stage came thundering in from the east, Rory McPherson and High Low had their patient waiting. After a few words from the doctor, the single passenger inside got up with the driver. Doc and High arranged the unconscious Fong Wick on one seat and the doctor spread his gear on the other. Then the stage rolled away into the west.

High Low stood mournfully in the dust, wiggling his toes in his old straw sandals. His parchmentlike face had paled. He shivered. In his heart was a suffocating sadness. His son never could be brought from faraway Foochow. He would have to go on down the years alone.

Then gladness, too, surged in his heart. His lifelong friend, Fong Wick, would be saved. He squared his scrawny shoulders again within the patched old jacket and pattered down a dark alley toward home.

But on his way he couldn't resist the temptation to peek in a rear window of the Golden Horn Saloon and Gambling Emporium. At a table close to where his eye was glued to the pane, five men were playing draw poker, their table surrounded by tense spectators watching the "big" game. High Low had heard that of late the audience at that game was larger than ever, for it was rumored some of Slash Breen's deals would bear watching.

Facing High Low was Breen himself, with his flat-crowned black hat shoved back on his sleek black head. High could see his shifty black eyes shuttling restlessly from one face to another, see how his long tapering fingers caressed his cards, see too clearly the compressed lips that formed a thin, almost blue line across his sallow face.

Suddenly Slash Breen moved. It was a movement High Low had many times seen him make, a movement so unlike him, and so unlike high-stake gamblers in general, that Breen was famous for it. The pot was a big one and Slash Breen held the high hand. When that happened, he always did the same thing —slammed his cards down with a report like a pistol shot, so hard the cuff of his black broadcloth coat slipped down over his fingers.

High Low watched the gambler rake in his winnings. Hate, cold deep implacable hate consumed the little Chinese café owner. There was enough in that pot of gold to bring a whole family from China. His right hand slipped inside his frayed jacket and fondled the carved handle of a keen-bladed dagger.

He couldn't see clearly, though, for all the bitter hatred within him was clouding his squinted eyes. Then the cool smoothness of the ancient dagger against his hot fingers brought him to his senses. Violence was not for him. It was so written in the scrolls of his revered ancestors. Slash Breen could only be brought to answer for his crime by the Spirit that brooded over all. With bowed head, High Low scuttled away.

But if violence was not for High Low, it was otherwise with Hop Gow. When the little caféman let his helper in at the back door at dawn the next morning, one shrewd glance at his hard yellow eyes told him that Hop Gow had heard of all that had happened in the night, and that the spirit of violence was upon him. High Low sighed deeply.

It took several minutes of serious whispering to calm the outraged spirit of the sullen Hop Gow, to erase from his opaque yellow eyes the murderous light that smoldered there.

High Low cooked while Hop Gow waited on the tables and the counter out front. When the first of the customers began to straggle in that morning, High Low threw several anxious glances at the sullen Hop Gow. But except that he was quieter than usual, his helper showed no outward sign that thoughts of violence were boiling in his brain. It was an hour later that it happened.

The screen door out front slammed to admit another customer. High Low peeked through the little opening in the partition for that purpose and saw Slash Breen seating himself at a table where several sidekicks of his were eating. For the first time in his life, High Low shook Cayenne pepper into a bowl of oatmeal mush and had to go to the back door and throw it out. When he turned back, he paused with one sandal lifted.

He could have sworn he had caught Hop Gow in an unfamiliar move, perhaps hastily returning something to the inner folds of his sateen jacket. But he couldn't be sure. And it was not such a thing as one man might question another about.

HIGH LOW started to fill another bowl with mush, which he knew Slash Breen always started with, when he noticed that Hop Gow had already filled a bowl and was on his way out to the gambler's table. Icy fingers tingled along High Low's bent spine. But it was too late to do anything about it. He dodged over to the little opening and watched.

"You plumb sure, Slash," one of the men at Breen's table asked half-jokingly, "that it's healthy for you to eat in here?"

High Low saw the famous gambler assume a puzzled expression, then a frigid smile flitted over his sallow face. "You mean," he sneered, "about that chink I beefed last night? I'd clean forgot about him." His face darkened. "You mean these here slew-feet might poison me?" He watched with narrowed eyes while Hop Gow set his bowl of oatmeal in front of him. Then he moved with swift power.

He shoved his chair back, grabbed Hop Gow by the collar, slammed him on his back across his knees and crammed spoonful after spoonful of the hot mush into the struggling waiter's mouth, forcing him to swallow it to keep from choking to death. Then he hurled him into a corner, whisked a derringer from a spring holster at his shoulder and

laid it on the oilcloth beside his plate.

"You move out of that corner, chink," he warned harshly, "and I'll blow a hole in your dining room a feller could pitch a dishpan through. If there's poison in that mush, we'll give it time to act."

High Low, watching with agonized tension from the kitchen, longed to be able to drag his helper out of there. But to attempt it would be to immediately join his ancestors. Besides, he consoled himself, as soon as Slash Breen saw the mush wasn't poisoned, he would release Hop Gow. Then suddenly the watching High Low felt his knees knocking against one another.

Hop Gow was crouched in the corner with an arm thrown up over his face. Every eye in the café was riveted on him. Men at the counter had stopped with spoons or forks lifted. Those at the tables were craning their necks. Slash Breen, a sardonic expression on his chiseled features, idly flicked the butt of the derringer with a pink fingernail. High Low's knees steadied, but in the pit of his stomach was a quivery feeling. Being Chinese, he was the first to see it coming.

Hop Gow clenched his fist. His body doubled over a trifle, to put the weight of his chest on his knees. He started to lift his head, then dropped it again on his crooked arm. High Low, his eyes wide with a stricken look, saw his helper shudder. He stiffened, then relaxed, then stiffened again. But, perhaps, even yet, unknowing Occidental eyes had seen nothing. High Low inhaled with a hissing sound, snatched up another bowl of oatmeal, pattered out and set it down in front of Slash Breen, grinning, kowtowing, fighting back the panic in his heart.

Without a word, the gambler picked up the big bowl of steaming mush and with a quick movement turned it upside down on High Low's head. The Chinaman screamed. Scalding porridge coursed over his face, down his skinny neck, over his hunched shoulders. With another shrill scream he scuttled for the kitchen.

Then he remembered and turned back, gouged hot mush from his burning eyes with his thumbs and tried to see. But his ears told him all he needed to know.

He heard a muttering sound, as though every man in the place was beginning to growl deep down in his throat. Then came one blended savage curse. The strident voice of Slash Breen sliced through the clamor.

"Look! Look at him! The dirty pig-tailed polecat tried to poison me! He's dying! *Now* look!"

Two explosions of the deadly derringer sent thunder rolling under the Ivory Duck's galvanized iron roof.

When High Low's spirit returned to this world of the living, he found himself crouched in his cubbyhole. He clasped his little bronze Buddha in a shriveled hand and trembled there in the dark with his face pressed tight against it. His thoughts flew back to the spring morning when his grandmother had intrusted him with the little image, in faraway Foochow, in an orchard hung with cherry blossoms nodding in the sun. His revered ancestors would be watching him now.

Blind instinct, he knew, must have saved him. Though crazed by pain from the scalding mush, and frantic with fear for Hop Gow, instinct had driven him to slip into his cubbyhole and swing the china shelves back into position. The howling mob, knowing nothing of the tiny hide-away, would have assumed he

had run into the alley and gone rampaging after him. He was puzzled, though, that all was so quiet. Then he caught a whisper.

With fear and trembling, and ready to dodge back any instant, he cautiously swung the shelves a fraction of an inch and peered out. It was night. In the dim reflection of the smelter flames roaring into the sky, he discerned his friend, Song Kee, hunkered in the center of the kitchen, whispering his name. High Low joined him and they whispered together.

Soon the story was out, and it was worse even than High Low had dreaded. After killing Hop Gow, Slash Breen had started to look for High Low, then changed his mind. A brilliant idea had come to the sardonic gambler. From the veranda in front of the Golden Horn he had made his announcement to the crowd.

That night at the stroke of midnight, the respectable citizens of Eureka, led by himself, would hold a chink hunt. Every Chinaman in town was to be shot down or strung up to a limb of the spreading sycamore tree beside the livery stable, where Hop Gow's stiffening body now hung. He, Slash Breen, would teach these Oriental scum to put poison in his porridge!

AFTER Song Kee had slipped away into the night, High Low sat long with his aching head in his work-worn hands. Without warning, and through no fault of his own, his whole world was suddenly being blasted into eternity. He didn't want to die. Away deep within him dwelt still a formless hope that some time, some way, he might yet bring his son to America to succor him in his old age, to bury him, and to look upon his grave with reverence befitting the ancestors of men. He sighed deeply, then faced the bitter truth.

There was a chance that he might still escape, hide perhaps in the home of some Mexican friend till the hue and cry had died down, then under cover of another night steal away to safety. But how about all the rest of his countrymen? More than forty of them made their home in Eureka, in the laundries, in restaurants, as servants, mucking in the mines. Every one of them High Low knew, and all of them as friends. Was he, the man they all looked up to as a tower of justice and understanding, to sneak away like a thief in the night, leaving them to certain doom?

High Low held the ugly little bronze Buddha tight against his hot forehead with trembling hands and fought the great fight with himself, then got forlornly to his feet. Squar-

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ing his thin shoulders resignedly, he saw that the battered alarm clock above the sink showed ten o'clock, and went about what his inmost heart told him he must do. He closed the back door of the Ivory Duck, perhaps for the last time, and padded wraithlike down the black alley.

Everyone in Eureka was acquainted with Slash Breen's invariable habits. Precisely at ten o'clock every evening, he entered the barber shop for a shave. From there he went to his room in the Eureka Hotel and dressed for the night's festivities, emerging in clean linen and freshly pressed black broadcloth. At eleven o'clock, he stalked gravely into the Golden Horn and took the seat he knew would be reserved for him.

By devious ways, High Low reached the rear of the Eureka Hotel. He knew Slash Breen occupied the room on the rear northwest corner of the second floor, secure from intrusion of the morning sun. With the aid of a crumbling drain pipe, a short piece of rope, and the stump of a broken butcher knife, High Low was soon inside. In the glare of the smelters he could vaguely see a fresh suit of broadcloth laid out ready on the bed. With his jade-handled dagger snuggled in his supple fingers, he advanced noiselessly across the carpet.

With an ear cocked toward the door for the first hint of detection, and with no light but the fitful glare of the throbbing blast furnaces, he worked away as industriously as a beaver repairing a hole in a dam, then faded into the night again.

It was twenty minutes to twelve when he saw the results of his labor. He was again crouched at the rear of the Golden Horn, with an eye glued to a lower corner of the cobwebbed window. Inside, the big gambling joint was seething with men. Not only was there the usual Saturday night crowd, but every man in town who could walk was there. All had been attracted like flies to a molasses barrel by Slash Breen's declaration of war against the helpless Chinese. And every man there knew the cold-eyed gambler would be as good as his word.

Breen and four other notables of the town were playing draw poker at the "big" table. Across from Breen sat an ominous figure, Dink la Due, as treacherous a gunman as ever left Missouri with a posse on his heels. Hawk-featured and sour, he hunched there over the green baize like a vulture over a poisoned waterhole, the worn cedar butt of his old Frontier Colt sticking up significantly beside his elbow. High Low watched with impassive patience.

It was twenty minutes to twelve when the play came that High Low had watched so patiently for. The pot grew and grew. Chips came in from all directions. Slash Breen, keeping the bottom card of the deck flush with the green baize, finally dealt the cards called for, then calmly slid his entire stack of blue chips to the center of the table. High Low, crouched out there in the chill dark, stopped breathing.

All but Dink la Due dropped out. That gentleman fixed the enigmatic face of the dealer with a colorless eye as unwinking as a rattlesnake's. The butt of his six-gun appeared to inch up toward his arm.

"Breen," he said out of the corner of his mouth, "you seem almighty sure of yourself."

Not the slightest change of expression was visible on Slash Breen's chiseled countenance. "You calling the bet?" he asked curtly.

IN a tension that could be fairly heard, Dink la Due matched the last stack of blues the dealer had shoved into the pot. "Let's see 'em!" he spat.

With the motion he always used when the pot was rich and he was sure of winning it, Slash Breen brought his cards down over his head and slammed them on the table top with a report like a pistol shot. He had won—an ace-full against La Due's three queens. La Due spread his cards with a disgusted motion and started to get up, then suddenly kicked his chair from under him and hung there like a cougar on the kill.

That motion of Slash Breen's had brought his coat sleeve, as it always did, halfway down over his hand. Dink la Due's snaky eyes were stabbing at the tip of that sleeve. The eyes of others followed his. Then Slash Breen himself, catching the direction of everyone's hypnotized gaze, glanced down. At that instant, Dink la Due fired.

Slash Breen half rose out of his chair, dropped his shaven chin on his starched shirt front, stood there for a moment as if lost in thought, then forced his chin upward again. His slim left hand dropped to the front of his vest, as if feeling to see if it was buttoned. But blood welled between his clamped fingers, dripped over his ornate watch chain, stained the edge of the green baize he swayed against.

That swaying motion turned him till he was facing the cobwebbed window. His ghastly eyes looked straighed into the sad eyes of High Low. The little man from the Ivory Duck, unseen by others, watched Slash Breen try to point at him and try to speak, then fold over the table on his face.

Dink la Due swore a fierce oath. "There lays the only chink who needed killin'!" he gritted.

Scurrying across the dark side street, High Low spied a light in Dr. McPherson's office and slipped inside. The medico was sprawled in his bullhide swivel chair with his sock feet on his desk, singing "Ye Banks an' Braes o' Bonnie Doon" in thundering tones, beating out the rhythm with savage swipes at a buzzing fly with his whiskey bottle. At sight of the shriveled little Chinaman, he picked up a linen sack and hurled it at High Low's head.

"Stow that away again, you Foochow fish cake!" he rumbled. "That Graham coot that married my girl wouldn't take our money. Just wanted to spite me. I hope he croaks!"

High Low danced from one foot to the other and wrenched his black straw hat into a figure eight with a crackling sound. "My fliend, Fong Wick?" he squealed.

"Hell's hoptoads!" exploded the physician crustily. "Fong'll be at the stage station with you to meet that rapscallion son of yours!"

Four men crowded in the door carrying what had been Slash Breen. Doc McPherson reached out and lifted the dead gambler's right hand. From a concealed slit in the seam of the coat cuff protruded a Jack of hearts.

"Huh!" grunted the medico. "Breen should have been plugged long ago, but I figured he had more savvy than to carry his own death warrant up his sleeve."

High Low was at the door, He paused, cuddled the linen sack beneath his shabby alpaca jacket and looked back. His agate eyes looked almost misty. "Boy come along Foochow now," he intoned softly. "Plenty good!"

THE END

TOP HAND

BY VON CORT

The cook stuck his head out of the shack and eyed the man walking across the yard toward him. "Another stray bum to feed," he grumbled, and prepared to give the stranger a discouraging reception.

The man wasn't much to look at, so the cook, who got tired of supplying meals to drifters, could hardly have been blamed for his attitude. This fellow had neither saddle nor horse. He wore a hat that hardly deserved the name, and his boots, once elegantly decorated with hand stitching, were down at the heels from too much walking, and loose and battered about the shanks. His pants were torn and dirty. His shirt and coat deserved no mention and his jaws were stubbly with a rusty growth.

But his back was straight and his shoulders wide and square, flaring out above a hard, flat chest. And there was a strange swing to those shoulders that might once have been called arrogant. Behind the dull, blue-gray eyes that stared at the cook from the deep noon shadow of the hat brim, had once been a man. Quite somewhat of a man, the cook decided suddenly.

The stranger took in the odor of food that drifted past the cook, and swallowed deeply a couple of times.

"Howdy. Where do I find the foreman?"

That was the old gag. A man asked for the foreman, was refused a job that he didn't want anyway and then expected to get fed. The custom of the country was generous, but a man should at least look as if he was eligible for a job if he wanted to ride the grub line.

"Where's your hoss?" countered the cook.

There was no amusement in the stranger's tone. "Ain't seen him for about half a year, so I dunno."

"You walked out here from Ferguson?"

"I didn't fly," the man said dryly. "Where'd you say the foreman was?"

The cook pointed. "Half a mile down the trail and beyond that patch of woods to the right. They're cuttin' some calves."

"Thanks." The man wheeled and began walking away. When he had gone about ten paces his legs suddenly, surprisingly, buckled under him and he went down in a heap. He didn't stir, but lay still like a wounded animal.

Joe roped the man-killing horse and the battle began.

The cook had seen that one a couple of times before. He reached inside the shack door and brought forth a whiskey bottle. Uncorking it, he went over and held it under the stranger's nose.

"Come on, buddy, have a drink," he said, ready to snatch the bottle away. But he had no need to. The man remained still.

"He's plumb out," said the cook aloud, suddenly filled with real concern. He dashed back into the cook shack and returned with a dipper of water and an opened can of milk.

Ten minutes later the stranger was sitting in the shade, eating soup and potatoes, eating slowly on the cook's instruction. It was his first meal in three days. Other than that he offered no information about himself. When Tim Connor, the foreman, and the rest of the crew came riding in for dinner, he managed to get up and ask for a job and say that his name was Joe.

"A ridin' job?" said Tim Connor. "How come?"

The stranger set his jaw a little. "I'm a top hand," he said briefly.

Jess Larsen, the Diamond Q top

hand, grinned and said, "He sure looks it."

Tim Connor was a kindly man, small, stocky, middle-aged. His hair was silvery-white and thick and his blue eyes were deep and patient.

"Where'd you work last?" he asked.

"I forget," said Joe, without batting an eye. "I plumb forget. I need a job bad."

A peal of laughter rose from those of the men who had lingered at the door to listen. "It's a cinch he needs somethin'," called Larsen.

"I can't hire you like that," Connor said a little brusquely. "You don't have a saddle or horse, you forget where you worked last. But you're a top hand just the same. It's a pretty tame joke; save it."

The man stared at Connor and swayed a little. "It ain't a joke. I need that job. Anything'll do."

Connor scratched his neck. "Got no jobs now. None that you could fill. You get your belly full and I'll lend you a horse to get to the next ranch."

"There ain't no next ranch, an' I don't want your horse."

YOU couldn't figure this one. He looked like a bum, yet he wanted work. Connor wanted to be rid of him, but was somehow strangely intrigued. There was something peculiar about the way this Joe stood in the circle of men, proud and stubborn and desperate at the same time.

At that moment, Bert, the horse wrangler, came chasing across the yard after a couple of horses that had strayed from the cavvy. They passed close by the men, who, however, did not bother to move. Except the newcomer. Connor saw him. As the horses came up he took a quick step toward the door to the shack and laid a trembling hand on the jamb. Then he relaxed suddenly and his nervous glance slid over the men. His chest heaved as if he was out of breath.

Connor's eyes narrowed. "Ain't I seen you somewhere before?" he inquired. But the job seeker shook his head in denial.

"I don't reckon so. I ain't been around much."

"Well," said Connor after a moment's thought, "there's a lot of post holes to be dug and fence to be fixed. The wagons need greasin' an' lookin' after. Cook can use a lot of firewood. You still want a job, ten bucks an' found?"

Larsen laughed raucously, but Joe did not seem to hear. He swallowed something and spat carefully in the dust at his feet. "Sure, an' thanks," he said.

So the man Joe, who had claimed to be a top hand, did work around the ranch, helped the cook and otherwise minded his own business. He spoke only when spoken to. The men left him alone. Except Larsen, whose mental kink was a fondness for "goats." And no one had been the "goat" at the Diamond Q for a long time.

Larsen had tried to make a goat out of the wrangler kid, Bert, and had ridden him hard till it looked like the kid was getting the worst of it. Then Tim Connor had egged the kid into standing up to Larsen, and the wrangler had nearly licked the burly Scandinavian before he was knocked out. After that Larsen gave up the teasing. Now Joe furnished him fresh and welcome material. There was something about the taciturn man which annoyed Larsen. Especially the fact that Joe did not seem to mind the rawhiding; in fact, appeared utterly unaware of the top hand's existence.

Now it was frequently: "Our spuds were peeled by a top hand today. Think of it!"

"How's the top-hand post-hole digger?"

"Are we gettin' a top-hand paint job on that buckboard?"

"Our top hand's carryin' water for the cook!"

But nothing could bother Joe, and after a while the men stopped laughing at Larsen's remarks. And soon Larsen came to hate the man who would not be ribbed, who practically made a fool of him in front of the others.

It was Bert, the wrangler kid, who one moon-bright night came upon Joe unexpectedly, down at the huge cavvy corral. Joe was standing near the gate, one hand white-knuckled on one of the bars. His other hand held a rope limply at his side. Joe's hat was off, and the kid could see large beads of sweat standing out on his white, contorted face.

"What's the matter, Joe?" he asked curiously.

The man jumped and turned from staring at the horses inside. "Nothin'. Nothin' at all!"

"What you doin' with the lariat?"

Joe hung the rope on a pole end and walked away without a word.

Another time, when the men were eating, the talk fell on the annual rodeos and famous riders who had been champions. It was Tim Connor who started talking about Dan Byers.

"Remember him?" he asked. "Took all the bucking and trick prize money that year in Burlingame. I don't care what you say, that man on a horse was better'n anybody I ever saw, an' I've seen plenty in my time."

Larson, who considered himself quite a bronc peeler, was loath to admit the superiority of anyone else. He nodded grudgingly. "Yeah, I seen him once in the Pendleton Roundup. He wasn't so bad."

"Wasn't so bad?" mocked Connor.

"Well, what the hell, you never hear anything about him now. Tell me what happened to him, will you!"

"Horse threw him and kicked him," said Connor. "I saw it. He spent three months in the hospital. I guess that made him some saddle-shy. Anyhow, I heard he went straight from the hospital to a contest and climbed the worst outlaw they had—to cure himself, I figger."

"Damn fool," somebody said.

"No," said Larsen. "That's the only way to do it."

"I heard that this outlaw dusted him off after three bucks and kicked him. Back to the hospital went Dan Byers an' nobody ever seen or heard from him since."

"Turned yellow, hey," Larsen said complacently.

"Maybe smart," said Connor. "A man's a damned fool to try to break his neck a third time if he's been hurt that bad. There's a lot more important things in this life than to get your liver flopped loose by a bucker."

"Not if you're a horseman," insisted Larsen. "I guess he turned yellow, all right."

"What's the matter, Joe?" the cook suddenly called, concerned about the food in the manner of all cooks. "Ain't the stew all right?"

Joe had put his half-empty plate in the pan and was walking out of the shack. His cheeks were grayish over the rusty stubble. "I ain't hungry," he said.

AFTER the fall roundup was over, work slacked off some, but Tim Connor kept Joe on. There was some mystery about Joe, and a

man hates to see an unsolved puzzle disappear. The men were riding line and popping strays out of the brush on the valley slopes. Larsen busied himself peeling a string of raw broncs for the cavvy.

One of the unbroken horses was a young, spirited buckskin gelding that very much resented the idea of having a rider on its back. Making a quick circuit of the breaking corral, he executed a string of furious crow hops, went suddenly into reverse and deposited his rider neatly in the dust.

Larsen landed on his hindquarters, hatless, after a fine somersault. His mouth was wide open in surprise. Bert, the horse wrangler, watching from the fence, started laughing.

The top hand got to his feet, picked up his hat and started for the fence. "What you laughing at?" he demanded truculently.

Bert kept on laughing. "You," he said. "You sure looked funny."

In one motion Larsen reached up and pulled the wrangler off the fence. "You're only a lousy wrangler kid. I'll learn you when to laugh."

A vicious fist slammed the surprised kid's face. He went down, his head hitting against the fence bar. He got up quick and tried to take a stance, but Larsen knocked him down again. The anger of hurt pride made him mean.

"Hold on a minute, Larsen," a voice called from outside the corral. "Why don't you pick somebody your own size?"

Larsen whirled from the kid to glare at Joe, who stood looking through the bars. "Meaning who?"

"Me," said Joe, with a sudden shine to his dull eyes. "Me, maybe."

It was unheard of that a shiftless choring bum should talk like that to the segundo of an outfit. Larsen roared with amazed contempt. "Step inside, you bum! Admission is free!"

In a flash Joe was at the gate and had opened it. Then he stopped. The buckskin, for some reason or other, happened at that moment to canter toward the gate, whinnying excitedly, perhaps hoping for a chance to escape. Immediately Joe slammed the gate shut and stood, tense and shaking, his face pale and drawn. He seemed to be nailed to the spot.

"You . . . you come on out here," he challenged Larsen after a moment.

But Larsen had seen. He strode forward, hazing the buckskin away with a wave of his hand, his eyes shining wtih wicked pleasure. "Well, I'm damned! So our top hand is yellow! So he's yellow, horse-shy! Well, well, well!"

He rubbed his hands in glee, like one who has just discovered a treasure. He saw in his imagination the endless torture and hazing to which he would now be able to subject Joe. "So that's what's been eating you all this while!"

Joe's shoulders sagged, his glance became dull and he looked more than ever the listless bum, ill-clothed and unkempt; an object that a respectable cowboy would barely talk to. He made no attempt to reply, but stood rooted to the spot.

At this moment the young wrangler made a foolish move. With an exclamation he sprang after Larsen and swung at him. The rider turned swiftly and clouted him, hitting him full in the face. The youngster went down and stayed down, his face in the dust. And now Larsen turned away from him and stepped out through the gate to pounce upon Joe.

"And now what was it you—"

He got no further. Behind him sounded an angry whinny and the rapid pounding of hoofs. A tawny body reared high in the air over the prostrate form of the wrangler. Forefeet flailed!

"Look out!" With a roar Joe shot past the astounded Larsen and into the corral, his battered old hat fanning the air. Shouting and crying at the top of his lungs, he sprang toward the horse. The animal veered off in the last second, planting its deadly hoofs scant inches from the wrangler's head. Then it backed away, confused by the interference. In another instant Joe had bent down and grasped one of Bert's hands. Still swinging his hat and shouting, he hauled the unconscious wrangler backward out through the gate that Larsen held ajar.

Once there, he straightened up, incredulous at what he had just done. Sweat poured from him and he began to tremble from head to foot. Larsen, on the other hand, gazed in astonishment from the wrangler to Joe and then to the horse, which, snorting angrily, trotted round along the corral fence inside.

"Holy catfish!" he said, awed. "He's a killer. Who'd 'a' thought it? He don't look like one."

Joe was watching Larsen's expression. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Like some people, he's a killer when he's got a man down."

AFTER that, Tim Connor noticed that the man who called himself Joe had a somewhat different bearing. There was hope in his eyes and a briskness to his step. Moreover, Larsen had stopped rawhiding him. When the segundo passed Joe, he would look at him with almost suspicious wonder. The word was passed around that the buckskin was a killer and to watch out for him, but Larsen did not tell the wrangler about his rescue from the deadly hoofs.

Not only Joe, but both Larsen and Bert seemed changed. Bert's nose had been broken in the fight and he no longer dared ridicule the top hand when he tried to break the buckskin. Instead, he sat brooding on the fence, hatred smoldering in his eyes. He watched Larsen getting thrown again and again by the tawny horse and, as soon as he hit the ground, scurry for the fence. Each time, Larsen would look at the horse and curse and then look at the silent wrangler, sitting there with his challenging, dour look. Bert's silence was almost worse than ridicule, and though Larsen would have liked to give up trying to break the horse and start on another, he could not. He seemed to have lost some of his nerve, and the horse seemed to know it. It would not be broken.

One day when Joe was standing outside the corral, watching Larsen's struggle with the buckskin, he heard Bert, on the fence top above him, mumble to himself:

"I'm just waiting to see that horse kill him. I'm just waiting. And if the horse don't, I will!"

"Listen, kid," said Joe, "get those ideas out of your mind. That kind of thoughts never did anybody any good."

Bert stared at the chore hand with contempt, trying to cover his angry embarrassment at being overheard. "I don't need advice from a white-livered, horse-shy bum," he said sullenly. "Mind your own business where men are concerned!"

Joe choked down the answer that crowded to his lips; then he shrugged and was about to walk away when

Larsen came crawling hastily over the fence as the buckskin sunfished by in a cloud of dust. It was obvious that this time the top hand had had enough. With his jaw set and his mouth a thin streak, he walked away toward the cavvy corral.

A triumphant expression spread on the wrangler's face. "Hey!" he called.

In vain Joe tried to stop him. "Don't, kid. Don't bother him now. You're just asking for trouble—"

Bert shook his hand off. "So he got you licked, eh?" he called after Larsen. "So you finally turned yellow, hey?"

The bronc peeler whirled in his tracks and came back slowly. He was pale with anger and very calm. The strain of gradually losing his nerve in the attempt to tame the buckskin and having the wrangler watch him had become too much to take.

"Listen," he said. "I'm tired of beating you up. You're so hell-fired itching to be a man among men, so let me tell you this: Next time you want to make that kind o' remark you better wear a gun. Put up or shut up!"

The wrangler was rather still and white as he watched Larsen walk away. Gradually color came back to his cheeks. "O. K.," he murmured. "O. K. by me."

"Don't be a fool," began Joe. "There's no sense—"

"And who asked *you?*"

Choking down the hot answer that rose to his lips, Joe wheeled and walked away. What he had done the other day in saving Bert's life had been purely instinctive. He'd found that out afterward. He was still not able to approach a horse, let alone mount.

The next afternoon, a Saturday, he was alone on the ranch. Picking up a rope, he neared the breaking corral where the buckskin trotted impatiently about. Gingerly Joe opened the gate and stepped inside. The animal snorted and wheeled away from him. Carefully the man stepped forward and shook out a small loop. On the fence hung a stock saddle. Now if he could only snub this cayuse to the fence and get that kak slapped on.

Expertly the rope shot out and snared the shiny neck. Joe dug in his heels and the battle began. He leaned back on the rope, and the horse fought it with all its might. Suddenly, when he had taken in about ten feet of lariat, the buckskin changed tactics and charged the man. Joe let go and found himself outside the gate, his heart beating like a trip hammer. The clammy hand of defeat was crushing him again. It was no use; he'd never ride again. He was just a worthless chore bum. That was all there was to it.

"You sure got it bad, cowboy."

JOE whirled and stood face to face with Tim Connor. At once he withdrew into his wonted shell, though color rose to his face. But there was understanding in that wrinkled, brown face and compassion in the deep-blue eyes. They stood in silence for a moment. Then the foreman of the Diamond Q began talking in his deep, easy drawl.

"Trouble with you, Joe, is that you think you're licked. You're not really horse-shy, but you're so damned sure that you are. Even when you stick your neck out to try again you say, "I know I'm licked, but I'm gonna try, anyhow."

Joe said nothing, but he was listening hard to the older man.

"I been watchin' you, an' it won't

work," Connor went on. "A man can't stew in his trouble all by himself. He lets it cook and cook inside him till he can't think of nothin' else. Your own self gets so damned important that you forget there's other and more important people right around you.

"That crazy Larsen and the kid wrangler are pretty much the same way as you," he continued. "There's nothin' wrong with either of them, but they don't know it. The kid's tryin' hard to be a man an' touchy of his pride. Larsen's on the wrong track because he can't get along with people. The truth is, he never tried the right way to get along with 'em. If he could only learn, he'd be all right. But neither of them is bad, or I wouldn't keep 'em on.

"You got to think of something more important than yourself. Of something outside yourself if you want to get along in this world. Get your feet on the ground first and kind o' figger what you're really tryin' to do, an' you'll come out all right."

The man, Joe, stood stock-still, saying nothing. His face was in shadow and there was no telling what went on inside his head. Connor turned away. "Well, mebbe I'm just talkin' through my hat. Mebbe I'm talkin' out of turn."

Joe was about to murmur an answer when Connor turned back. "I plumb forgot. I was lookin' for Bert. I want him to do an errand for me in town. Seen him?"

"No," said Joe. "I ain't. I ain't seen him around all afternoon."

Connor scratched his head. "Funny thing," he said thoughtfully, "one of my guns is gone. You know them two pearl-handled .38s that hang up in the hallway of the house? Well, somebody took one of 'em. I can't figger it. In all my years on this ranch nobody ever took nothing from anybody else without asking."

He began walking away. "Well, if you see the wrangler, tell him I want to see him."

Joe stood looking after him. The gun? Who could have taken that gun? He knew that Larsen had gone to town, but where could Bert be? He glanced at the bunkhouse. No sign of life there. None at the cook shack. This was Saturday. Even the cavvy corral was empty, the horse herd being loose on pasture.

Connor had disappeared into the ranchhouse. The buckskin snorted in the breaking corral. At the moment it was the only horse available. And a moment later Joe had re-entered the corral and had picked up the trailing end of the rope. The fight began all over again.

"Come on, you!" he called. "Come on here and learn who's the boss!"

The horse snorted and reared, front hoofs flailing the air. But the man would not be daunted. He was in a hurry. He had a purpose. He had to get to town in a hurry. Maybe he would be too late. The thought chilled him and he got actually impatient with the horse.

"Who do you think you are?" he shouted to the buckskin, hauling in on the rope at a rate of two feet at a time. "A killer? You're gonna take me to town and help me stop another damned fool who thinks he's one, too!"

Whipping a slack of the rope around a pole end, he managed to snub the horse close to the fence. The horse, its head forced high, could do little bucking. It rolled its eyes and snorted in apprehension at the determined man.

In no time at all the hackamore was on. Next, Joe swung the sad-

dle on and cinched it, making an extra bend in the latigo. Dashing across the yard to the bunkhouse, he grabbed the first pair of spurs he could find and put them on. In the cook shack he found a short knife which he stuck in his belt. Back in the corral he left the gate wide open and prepared to climb on the horse. But the buckskin had other ideas. Scratching and rolling and rearing, it fought the snubbed lariat that held it to the fence. To try to mount was like attempting to get on a case of dynamite in the midst of a rock slide.

Joe mounted the fence, poised himself on the second top bar and waited his chance. The horse knew what he wanted to do and moved away. Joe moved past its head and to the other side. The buckskin danced away. There was only one thing to do, and Joe did it. He mounted the top bar, ran along it and dived for the saddle.

Once in his seat and his hand on the hackamore reins, Joe dug in the spurs and pressed the horse toward the fence. His knife came out of the belt and slid under the snaring rope around the strong neck. Then they were both free, the horse making one wildly bucking circuit of the corral before it shot out through the gate like a greased bullet.

The buckskin stopped dead-still, whirled, sunfished, bucked, crow-hopped. Joe was still on. He was suddenly filled with exultation. This horse wasn't so much. He'd ridden worse in his time. He let the animal tire of bucking, then dug in the spurs with a will.

"All right, you son of a gun! Let's see how good you are at making time to town!"

Wide-eyed, and with drooping jaw, Tim Connor stepped to the gallery edge and watched the sun-smitten trail of dust that streaked toward town. He'd seen a man ride like that once long ago.

THERE were few people in the Ferguson main street when Joe and the buckskin tore down the middle of it. The few that were abroad were looking expectantly toward the Emporium. Driven by instinct, Joe reined over to the rail and skidded the horse to a halt. He slid from the saddle, hitched and ducked under the rail, heading for the door.

A man watching something inside over the swing flaps, put out a warning hand. "Don't go in there! Hell's goin' to pop!"

Joe didn't stop. He burst through the doors and blinked at the semi-darkness inside.

The bartender was gone from behind the bar and the few customers in the place were crowding the far walls. Bert, the kid wrangler, stood at one end of the mahogany, Larsen at the other. By the look of them they had had all the words they were going to have. It would be gun smoke from now on.

The kid was pale and stiff, his eyes slitted. Sweat was on his brow, but he was game. It was easy to see he'd been drinking to insure his courage. Larsen's face was crimson with anger, and yet Joe could see that he did not want to kill this fool kid who had insulted him.

But the kid was goading him to the point where he'd have to. After all, a man can take only so much. A pride-touchy kid, trying to prove himself, is a dangerous animal.

Joe must have come at the crucial moment, for he saw their gun hands relax. He walked briskly to the bar between them. He faced the wrangler first.

"You look kind of excited, Bert. What's up?"

The wrangler waved his left hand stiffly, while he tried to keep his glance on Larsen. "Out of the way, bum. Out of the way!" His voice was shrill and unnatural.

Larsen spoke up hoarsely: "Move on, move on. I've taken all I'm gonna take from this fool kid."

Pretending surprise, Joe looked from one to the other, then he walked up to the wrangler. Bert pulled out Connor's pearl-handled gun.

"Get out of my way or I'll—"

Joe kept coming. He laid a calm hand on the gun and pointed it down. Then he gestured over his shoulder at Larsen. "Bert, you're trying to kill the man that saved your life—"

He told the wrangler the incident of the corral. Only in this version, Larsen was the one who dragged Bert out, while he, Joe, held the gate open.

Something broke in the kid, then, and the tension relaxed. He began shaking slightly and Joe saw the opportunity to lift the gun out of his hand. The wrangler pushed past Joe toward Larsen, whose face was a picture of bewilderment.

"I didn't know that, Larsen. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I . . . I—" Larsen's jaw worked, but he had trouble forming the words. Behind the kid's back Joe was winking and gesturing furiously.

"I guess I'm just a damned fool," said Bert. "I don't blame you for—"

"Forget it, forget it," Larsen said hastily. "You're all right. I guess it's me that's a damned fool. Let me tell you the truth, though—"

But Joe shook his fist at him and they stood in awkward silence, something happening inside all of them. Then Joe said, "Come on outside and see what I rode to town on."

They stepped outside and wouldn't believe their eyes, staring in open-eyed amazement. Probably they weren't really convinced till Joe mounted the buckskin and rode him around the square. When he dismounted they were all grinning. Tim Connor rode up in time to see the tail end of the show.

"Dan Byers," he told Joe, "I think it's about time you shaved those red whiskers off."

Then they all went into the Emporium, for a round of drinks bought by Larsen.

When the man who had called himself Joe took his departure from the Diamond Q a couple of days later, he was clean-shaven and looked a good deal different from the drifter who had walked into the place three months before. There was luster in his eyes and his head was held high.

"Well, Dan," said Connor, "I suppose we'll be seein' you taking prize money in the rodeos around the country again."

Dan Byers shook his head. "I'm going home," he said. "Home to work the old man's ranch. I've found out there's a lot of damned sight more important things in this world than to get your liver flopped loose by a snaky horse."

He shook hands all around and rode down the trail on the buckskin. The others stood watching him till he was out of sight.

"And to think I called him a bum!" said Bert, the wrangler.

"Yeah, me, too," put in Larsen. "Let me tell you, feller, that hombre is a top hand. And that word covers a hell of a lot of territory. Sometime I'll tell you just how much."

THE END.

PHANTOM OF THE GEE POLE

BY KENNETH GILBERT

With his old wolf dog, Taku, leading the way, the Siwash Kid headed north by night under a sky so filled with brilliant, vitreous-hard stars that it seemed as though a god's fistful of jewels had been flung at the heavens and had stayed there. In the tingly silence the Kid's mukluks made crunchy sounds on the brittle snow. Now and then came

a startling snap from the depth of spruce glooms as the frost struck at the heart of a sapling. Smoky vapor from the Kid's breath curled about his head as he turned involuntarily at these abrupt noises. He had the feeling that unseen things were watching him; for there was a ghostly eeriness about the subarctic night that seemed to hint of evil.

The Kid stopped suddenly as from ahead came a savage snarling, then a creaking sound as of sled runners on dry snow. But his carbine came to his shoulder with a jerk, for the cloud of dark, hurrying shapes that swept toward him over the lip of the rise ahead appeared to be a pack of wolves. The Kid knew that the black Siberians, renegades from wolf packs which normally ranged the Asian plains across Bering Strait, but which had come to Alaska over the ice in some severe winter, were fearless and deadly. He called a sharp command to Taku, who stopped, and then he saw that the oncomers were not wolves, but dogs hitched to a laden but riderless sled.

The dogs halted but a few paces away from the Kid, who regarded them doubtfully. By the light of the stars he could see that they were fagged, trail-worn, but they had been hazing along as though the devil himself was cracking a lash over them. They lay in their harness now, breathing heavily, tongues lolling as though in a ghastly semblance of good humor. Now and then they turned their heads and pricked ears as their wolfishly lambent eyes swung back to the sled.

But there was no human figure there. From where he stood the Siwash Kid saw merely a skillfully lashed load on the sled, the whole covered with a wolf robe. Thrust ahead of the sled was the gee pole by which the sled was guided, and at the back were the handle bars. A good, serviceable-looking sled such as might be met up with anywhere on northern trails. But where was the dog musher, the man who handled this team?

Taku snarled suddenly, and the Kid, eying him in surprise, saw that the old sled dog's hackles were uplifted. Every hair on his body seemed to be standing on end.

"Easy, Taku!" the Kid commanded uneasily.

After all, the Kid was pretty much of a boy and he was alone in the deep wilds. The sudden appearance of this driverless team, the peculiar actions of old Taku, were things that suggested vaguely menacing possibilities. "What's wrong, Taku?" he asked. "You're too smart to want to fight a team of strange dogs!" But the old dog, wise in many things, was not so easily reassured. His snarling subsided but his hatred and fear clearly persisted.

AND then the Kid saw that Taku was not looking at the dog team itself, but beyond—*at the sled!* With a queer feeling along his spine the boy went forward cautiously. The dogs hardly paid him any attention; they were too near exhaustion. Dreading the thing he expected to see, the Kid began unlashing the babiege thongs which held the load in place. Taku had fallen silent, but stood watching from a point several paces off—apparently he would come no nearer—in a manner that indicated horror and suspicion.

The Kid lifted the wolf robe and peered beneath. But all he could see were the usual odds and ends of trail equipment. A snugly rolled tent, a primus stove, dishes and sev-

eral packages that appeared to contain food. Just as any seasoned trailer might have put his outfit together for a trip. The sleeping bag looked almost new. Tucked down in one side of the belly of the sled were several moosehide pokes. The Kid saw them with suddenly widened eyes. He did not have to lift them to determine that they were heavy, that they undoubtedly contained gold.

Down one side of the sled, too, where the wolf robe had failed to reach, were several curious blotches. They felt icy to the Kid's touch. He rubbed them, then looked at his fingers in the weak light from the stars. Blood!

Of a sudden he drew back as though he had been jabbed by the point of a knife. Not at what he had discovered, although that was startling enough under the circumstances; but at the realization of what the queer actions of this dog team and old Taku might possibly mean.

"Dogs," he told himself, "can see things human beings can't. Taku won't come near this sled. And those dogs were hazing along as though they were being driven. *Maybe they were! Maybe old Taku saw the driver!*"

But as quickly he assured himself that such a thought was ridiculous. It might do for superstitious Siwashes, but he was a white man with a white man's common sense. He thought of his practical, hard-headed partner, Jim Frayne, up there on the claim beyond Wolf Pass. "I'd never dare let on to Jim that I believed such nonsense for a second," the Kid reflected. But at the same time there were insistent questions hammering away at his consciousness.

"Where's the driver of this team?" was one of them. "What happened to him? *Who was he?*" And suddenly the Kid's recollection supplied the possible answer to the last query.

Back at Zero Bend he had been warned to be careful. He had reached the little settlement after a long mush from the claim he and Jim Frayne held up north, and had arranged for a big store of supplies to be hauled out to their mine before the snow left that spring.

"On your way home, Kid," they had told him at the trading post, "keep your eye peeled for Smoky Fallon. Newcomer to these parts, but he's deadly. Mounties want him for killin' a couple prospectors on the Upper Stikine. They sent word that he's crossed the boundary into Alaska and may be headin' south with a fast team and some of his loot. There's a price on his head and he'll kill on sight. Just be careful if you meet up with some dog musher who looks like he's in a hurry."

Here was a dog team which could fill the description of Fallon's, even though they were tuckered now. On the sled were pokes of gold, possibly the stuff Fallon had taken from the slain prospectors on the Stikine. A wolf howled dismally from a nearby hogback, and at the weird, lugubrious sound which seemed to hold in its drawn-out sobbing all the loneliness of the primitive wild, the Kid felt a responsive prickling along his spine. There was blood on the sled —blood had stained the soft skin pokes of gold. To the boy's horrified fancy it seemed that he saw, leaning on the gee pole of the driverless sled, a grim, remorseless figure. So startling was the illusion that he stifled a cry as he involuntarily lifted his gun.

But he shook his head angrily the next moment, telling himself that

all this was nonsense, that he was letting imagination play him tricks. That what he had seen, if anything, was probably his own faint shadow cast from star shine, his silhouette marked out by light from that incredibly brilliant galaxy of distant worlds which studded the night sky. Either that or a wisp of vapor from the breaths of the tired sled dogs as they sprawled on the glittering snow, a shred of frosty fog which had taken a strange shape ere it vanished.

A PURRING snarl from old Taku jerked the boy completely back to reality. Likewise the weary dog team came up sharply, tense and watchful. As though pulled by the same string, their wolfish heads swung around until they stared fixedly in the direction whence they had come. Then their leader, an old malemute whose white-ringed eyes gave him a look of grotesque dignity, surged against the traces in an effort to start the sled.

The others followed suit. Clearly they wanted to be off again on their mad mush, as though they had heard a command which no human ear could have detected. But in their interval of rest upon encountering the Kid and Taku the runners of the well-laden sled had frozen to the ice crust. Realizing this at once and knowing the remedy for it, they surged sideways in an endeavor to break clear. But before they could accomplish it, the Kid's voice lashed at them sharply:

"*Whoa!*" Obediently they halted, but stood there uneasily as though ready to break and run. The Kid caught hold of the gee pole and upset the sled on its side. The dogs were helpless to get away now. Then the Kid turned as he glimpsed a figure moving down the slope.

It was a big man and armed, for a rifle was snugged against his parka. The Kid's first emotion was relief. The loneliness of this desolate spot, the hint of mystery which suggested the supernatural, made him welcome the sight of a human being. If it hadn't been for the evident hostility of old Taku, the boy would have called out a welcome. Instead, without knowing why he did so, he moved quickly behind a snow-laden clump of saskatoon.

The stranger saw the overturned sled and gave an exclamation of triumph as he hurried forward. But he stopped abruptly as Taku snarled and his gun started to lift, but he made no attempt to raise it to his shoulder as the Kid appeared from behind the saskatoon, carbine easy and ready.

For only an instant the newcomer hesitated. Apparently he was a man of quick decisions. In swift appraisal by the uncertain light of cold stars he must have seen that the Kid was young. The old sled dog beside the boy was hardly a serious threat. The man lifted a hand in friendly salute.

"Thanks!" he called out. "You stopped those runaways, eh? They've given me plenty trouble since I left Circle. Injun dogs, I reckon, and they don't like a white man. Got away from me when I stopped to make camp back there four, five miles."

The Kid saw something glittering on the man's left breast. The newcomer caught his scrutiny and smiled. "I'm Bill Harlan," he announced. "Deputy United States marshal. Been on the trail of this outlaw, Fallon!"

The Kid sighed in relieved reaction to his previous tensity. Deputy

marshal! And yet for a moment the boy had been suspicious. But that badge on the outside of the man's parka and his reassuring manner were heartening. The Kid grinned.

"Thought at first you might be Fallon himself," he explained. "They warned me at Zero Bend to keep my eyes peeled."

Harlan laughed. "Don't need to worry about Fallon. I left him up yonder"—he gestured northward—"in the snow. Came on him and we shot it out. He lost. Fell into a crevasse or I'd have brought his body in."

"And this," the Kid guessed, indicating the dog team, "was his outfit? I wondered about the bloodstains on the sled and those pokes of gold!"

Harlan looked at him intently a moment, then shrugged. "You guessed it. Hadn't noticed that he'd left any sign." He moved toward the sled and the dogs came instantly alive, snarling.

Harlan stopped. "You see what I'm up against," he complained. "They're strange dogs. Don't like me. Reckon Fallon must have got them from the Injuns. Well," he added grimly, "maybe they'll get the hang of things. You goin' far north, son?"

The Kid nodded. "Beyond Wolf Pass. Got a claim there—and a pardner. Jim Frayne. You heard of him?"

Harlan considered for a moment, but his gaze held the boy. "Nope! Can't say that I ever did."

"But he's an old-timer in the North!" the Kid said in surprise.

"Sure," agreed Harlan. "Might be. But the North is a large place. Can't always—" He broke off as a wolfish howl sliced through the silence.

THE Kid looked around sharply. Taku was gone! His gaze swung back to Harlan in puzzlement. "You see where that old wolf dog of mine went?" he asked. "He was here a few minutes ago. Now he's pulled out!"

The other shrugged impatiently. "Drifted off somewhere, I suppose. Well, I'll be movin'." He caught hold of the gee pole and turned the sled upright again despite the warning of the dogs. The Kid eyed him, trying to fathom his feeling that something was wrong. At the same time the wolf howl sounded again.

"Taku!" the Kid exclaimed suddenly. "He's up there beyond that ridge—in the direction you came from, Harlan. Somethin's wrong with him!"

"Well," Harlan said sharply, "go see for yourself! I've got to get this team in hand." His voice, harsh and bitter, reached out at the rebellious team. "Mush, you devils! *Mush!*"

But although they trembled, their snarling swelled in a chorus of defiance and they did not obey. Harlan stepped back and lifted his gun.

"Wait!" the Kid called anxiously. "What you figure to do, mister?"

"I'm goin' to kill that leader!" Harlan said angrily. "Maybe it'll put some sense in the heads of the others."

"Wait!" the boy cried again. He, too, was shaking even as were the dogs, but somehow the carbine was still ready in his hands and he discovered, curiously enough, that it had been there ready all this time.

Harlan turned on him angrily, but the carbine made him cautious. "You tryin' to interfere with the law? Keep out of this or I'll want to know why you're travelin' at night, alone, and with only the outfit you've got on your back. Slip-

pin' along as though you're runnin' from somethin'!"

"The answer to that," replied the Kid, "probably goes for you as well. Anybody knows that at this season its easier travelin' at night when the snow is crusted over. And I don't aim to interfere with the law, unless it's the sort of unwritten law that says a man can't kill a good dog in cold blood. Even this outlaw, Fallon, likely wouldn't have done that!"

Harlan's anger seemed to melt. He grinned apologetically. "Hell, son, I really didn't mean it! I was just goin' to scare that leader by puttin' a bullet past his ears." His voice was placating enough, yet the Kid did not relax.

"For a lawman," declared the boy slowly, "you handle things queer. You say you've been drivin' that team after a fight with Fallon up north. But those dogs act like they never saw you before—or if they did you never handled 'em! They weren't afraid of *me* when they came up and stopped. They were gettin' away from somethin'—as though the devil himself was ridin' the gee pole!"

Again old Taku called from afar. The Kid was nervous, excited, but strove not to show it. He knew that the situation was shaping rapidly toward some climax which could not be foreseen.

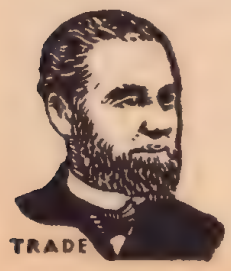
Deputy marshal though Harlan seemed to be, the Kid likewise knew that he disliked this man. However, any doubt of the man's identity seemed to be fully discounted by apparent facts. Harlan and Fallon couldn't be the same because the outlaw was driving his own team, so they had said at Zero Bend. This team and Harlan were strangers. The deputy's story seemed to be clinched at every point.

He had killed Fallon in a gun fight. This was Fallon's team and his outfit, just as described; these pokes of bloodstained gold on the sled must have been his loot. It sounded straight enough and yet some insight of the Kid told him it was wrong. Even the distant mourning of Taku seemed part of the same mystery; old Taku, in his wisdom, never did things without good reason. *What was Taku saying?*

These thoughts raced through the Kid's brain even as he spoke. Harlan's reply was swift but calm.

"Son," he said, "supposin' you give me a hand with this team. Maybe dogs are smarter than what we figure. Maybe they hate me be-

ROMEOS



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cause they know I shot Fallon." He moved back a step and the star shine glittered on the badge he wore.

THE Kid felt a sudden chill. This man was a killer all right, even if he was an officer. Maybe deputy marshals had to be that way, hard enough to kill a man, even a dog. Harlan was hard and cold all the way through, like one of the frosty peaks etched against the night sky, and whose hearts never thawed even in hottest summer. Cold and stone hard. The Kid felt quick sympathy for these helpless dogs.

"I'll straighten 'em out for you, mister," he agreed. "Maybe they'll behave from here on to Zero Bend." He started forward confidently, lowering the carbine. And at that instant Harlan moved.

The thing was so incredible to the Kid that for a fractional part of a second he was too stunned to react. Harlan took another swift step backward toward the sled, his gun barrel glinting as it lifted. Flame lashed out from the muzzle. There was fleeting impact against the Kid's right shoulder as though a falling trip hammer had brushed him. Yet he was already pitching forward in the snow as he sought to duck the menace of that gun muzzle, and he knew that miraculously he was not hurt.

He rolled over abruptly and half raised in shooting position with such unexpected quickness that the murderous Harlan, moving for a closer, more certain shot in the dim light, sprang aside and fell back apparently without realizing that he was moving upon dangerous ground. As the little carbine blasted at him at short range, Harlan moved so suddenly to avoid the shot that he stumbled in the snow and went down.

For his part the Kid had acted instinctively. There was no time to count consequences or analyze the meaning of the situation. He was fighting for his life, and it made no difference that the man trying to kill him was an officer, perhaps a crazed slayer. All the Kid knew was that his own shot had gone wild, that Harlan, probably having reloaded, now had the advantage. Desperately, the boy's fingers worked the lever of the carbine even though he knew he would be too late. Yet aid came from an unexpected source.

Harlan had fallen within reach of the sled dogs, and the leader, leaping in, fairly jerked the other dogs off their feet. Their hatred and fear of this man had stirred an ancient wolfish heritage in their blood—the urge to strike a fallen foe. Their muffled snarlings were buried in the thickness of the man's parka as they bore down his crouched figure under the weight of their furry bodies. Only the fact that they instantly became twisted in their own harness saved Harlan from a horrible and immediate death.

So horrible, indeed, that the Kid, forgetting for the moment that this man had sought to kill him, was charging among the malemutes, swinging the carbine right and left and yelling at them. They fell back from his onslaught, the kill lust gone as quickly as it had come. The Kid retrieved Harlan's gun, threw it aside, and bent over the man. But Harlan did not stir.

But the Kid knew that the man was not dead, perhaps not even severely hurt. He might have been merely knocked unconscious by the impact of the heavy wolf dogs on him, or maybe he had fainted in sheer fright. The Kid felt relief that was tinged with strong anxiety over his own predicament. This fight

might brand him as an outlaw. Probably Harlan was crazy, yet he was a lawman. It would be his word against the Kid's. The boy had a sudden impulse to run away, yet he knew that would be cowardly.

"Might as well face the music," he told himself. "I'll take him to Jim Frayne. Can't be far from here. I ought to get there by daylight. Jim will know what to do." It was at such moments as this that one needed a partner.

Remotely, old Taku again voiced his strange lonely cry.

The Kid worked swiftly with trembling hands. He rolled Harlan's limp figure on top of the sled load and passed a babiege thong over him several times so that he wouldn't fall off. "Lucky for me if he doesn't die," the boy worried. "Got to get Taku and then we'll go on." Boldly he went among the dogs, straightening out the harness. They submitted silently. Again he wondered at that. They hated Harlan to the point of refusing to let him come near them, but they seemed to take no offense at the Kid.

"Mush!" he called at last, swinging them into the north. They obeyed like the well-trained dogs they were. But as they topped the rise they halted with uneasy whinings at the sight of two figures that looked like dark shadows moving slowly toward them.

THE Kid halted the team uncertainly, and his carbine swung to readiness.

"Taku?" he called out questioningly.

One of the figures broke away and came on more rapidly. Then the Kid heard a voice that was familiar, though weak and hoarse, "Kid? That you?"

"Jim!" cried the boy. "Jim Frayne!" He cut away from the sled and went to meet the other man. "What happened? What you doin' here?"

Frayne stood with feet braced apart, shaking his head dazedly. It was apparent he was in bad shape. His clothing was torn, he was plastered with snow and his left arm hung limply, the fingers stained with blood.

"Got waylaid," he replied thickly. "Kid, I made a big strike on our claim, got pokes and pokes of it in free gold. Wanted to head you off at Zero Bend because we'll need a crew next spring to open this new vein. Bought a dog team off a trapper and started out with the gold. Got nearly this far when somebody took a shot at me, hit me in the arm. I rolled off the sled and went into a crevasse. I'd have died there if old Taku hadn't come along and showed me the way out. Reckon he was howlin' to tell you what was wrong. Feller who shot me took the outfit and started on, but I heard him cussin' the dogs and I knew he was havin' trouble. I figured I was goin' to die in that crevasse, Kid, and I knew you'd meet this killer. Got to thinkin' of it so hard that it seemed almost as though I was ridin' the gee pole again, tryin' to get ahead of him and warn you!"

The boy regarded his partner in awe, and again that feeling of eerie mystery came over him. Yet he was no superstitious native; he was a white man. Probably the dogs had scented the fresh blood of Jim Frayne on the sled and their terrified hurrying had made it seem as though a ghost rode the gee pole. Besides, he argued, there could be

no such thing as the ghost of a man not yet dead. And yet— So long as dogs, supposedly gifted with powers unknown to human beings, could not tell what they had seen, how would he know? How could anybody know? The Kid shivered a little, putting the idea from him, for the reality of fact was more important at the moment.

"Then," he asked Jim Frayne, "this was *your* sled, your outfit?"

Frayne nodded, and suddenly his eyes fell on the unconscious form of the man lashed atop the load. "Thunder," he marveled, "you got him, Kid! But how?"

"Tell you later," returned the boy. "We'll take him to Zero Bend. He's a lawman, but he must be crazy!" He indicated the badge on the man's parka.

"That thing?" retorted Frayne. "He must have taken it off some real lawman he'd killed. I figure he must have lost his own team and outfit after gettin' away over the border. I heard about him from this trapper who came to the claim. This man needed another outfit, so he didn't hesitate tryin' to kill *me*."

The Kid's face showed his relief, but Frayne was continuing:

"Take him to Zero Bend? I'll say we will! Lawman, you say? Hell, I knew this bushwhacker years ago up in Dawson! Kid, that's Smoky Fallon you've got there!"

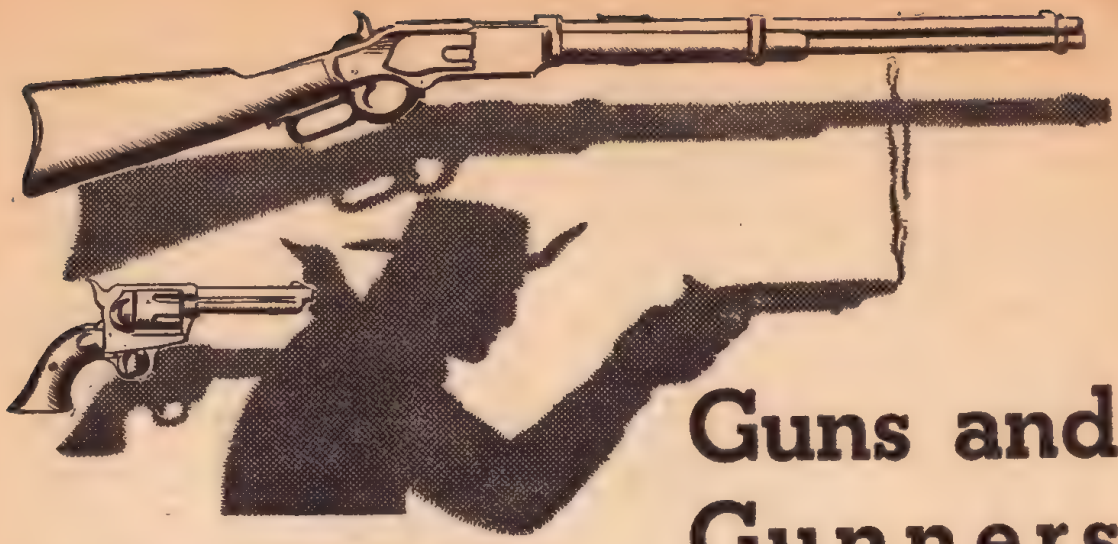
THE END.

CORRALS

Every well-ordered cattle ranch must have a number of corrals, each designed for a special purpose. As a rule, the first one built is round in shape, made of logs or poles and posts, with long "wings" extending some distance from the gate or set of bars, so that the wild horses may be forced through the entrance. This is the horse corral and is used almost exclusively for handling the wild ones who, if put into a corral having corners, might jam into the fence and injure themselves or each other. When a wild animal finds himself confined his terror overshadows reason, and in his frantic effort to escape he will charge violently against any obstacle. This corral is also used for horses which are being gentled. Sometimes these horses are ridden there for the first time.

Next in importance is a large square corral, capable of holding the steers that are to be shipped for market. On two sides of this inclosure are smaller corrals where the culls are cut to and any strays are held until their ownership can be decided. This set of corrals is for general puposes; here the spring branding takes place, and if the ranch is a large one, the beef crop is sold to the buyers who come from the commission houses to get steers for the Kansas and Nebraska feed lots.

In the early days of the Western ranches the narrow chutes, now found on nearly all ranches, were unknown. Then all cattle were roped and branded on the open range. Now many steers never feel a rope. Instead, the animal is wedged into a narrow chute, bars are placed before and behind, and he is branded by a man on the other side of the fence, who pokes a hot iron through a hole. The procedure is not very picturesque, but it's much easier on all concerned than the old way.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

FEW articles in recent months have excited more interest than our yarn concerning Damascus, twist, and laminated-steel barrels, and the dangers of using this type of shotgun with any form of smokeless ammunition. Most of the readers who wrote us about this article complimented us highly and reported many cases of blown-up guns when used with standard ammunition as loaded today. In some cases they reported their own accidents and in other cases, those of their friends. A few chaps, however, insisted that they had used those old guns for many years and had never had the slightest bit of trouble and that they considered that their guns were perfectly safe.

I don't consider that their guns are safe; neither does the manufacturer of any modern shotgun shell, *no exceptions!* All gun manufacturers are recommending that no early guns of their make having Damascus barrels be used with any form of smokeless powder as made today. Why not heed this warning, regardless of your ideas concerning the strength of your thirty-to-fifty-year-old shotgun? Again, we repeat: No Damascus, twist, or laminated-steel barrels have been manufactured since the industry folded up in 1914. Therefore, your Damascus barrel has got to be at least twenty-five years old. Ammunition, including powders made today, are much different from those made a quarter of a century ago.

We still get a lot of inquiries concerning ammunition brands. Frankly, it makes little difference what brand of ammunition you

LITERATURE FOR YOU!

Various literature is available to our readers for postage stamps to cover mailing costs. Here is our latest lists: "STRAIGHT SHOOTING," 16 pages of shooting instructions, 3c; "WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK," 72 pages, 5c; "WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK," 44 pages, 3c; "FANCY SHOOTING," by "Ad" Topperwein, 16 pages, 3c; "COLT," 3c; "SMITH & WESSON," 3c; "REMINGTON," 6c; "SAVAGE," 3c; "STEVENS," 3c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c east and 38c west of Chicago.

Postage stamps are accepted. If your letter requires a reply, inclose an additional stamp.

choose. We have in this country an organization known as the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute. This is composed of all arms and ammunition manufacturers of consequence. They get together regularly and standardize the various gun dimensions, calibers, and ammunition for these guns so that a cartridge made by any manufacturer will fit the gun of any other manufacturer in the same caliber. Also, they load to a certain definite standard. It it wasn't for that, one brand of ammunition would shoot high while another would shoot low in the supposedly same load.

Rummaging through a large collection of notes on my desk I find a couple of new items of interest.

The first of these is a very interesting book, "Gun Collecting" by Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel. This is a mighty interesting handbook for gun collectors. It contains, not a detailed listing of old guns, but practical information on the art of collecting guns, chapters on firearms history, on gun photography, and how to identify various old specimens.

Only an experienced collector like Lieutenant Chapel could assemble such a volume. It tells you how to avoid getting stuck on old guns, and in many cases your first purchase after reading this volume should save the price of the book.

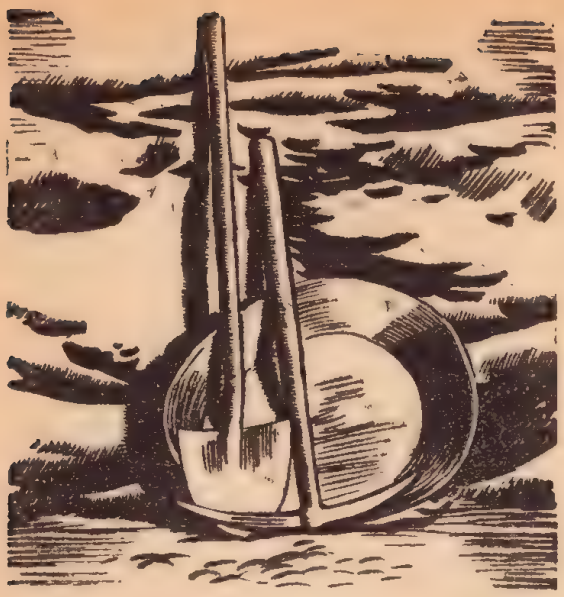
The volume is well written and every aspiring collector should read it before spending money gathering miscellaneous firearms. Published by Coward-McCann, New York City, it contains 232 pages, size 7½ x 5, with 15 pages of illustrations, price $2.50.

A long time ago we told you of another new book—a revised version of L. D. Satterlee's "Catalog of Firearms." The volume came out in a very limited edition last fall and within three weeks of the publication Satterlee wrote me he had but fifteen copies left, and by now they are again all taken. He does not plan to reprint it immediately.

The advanced collector who really wants some practical data is getting another break from Satterlee, however. He is assembling a photostatic group of reproductions of ten old gun catalogs which are extremely rare and worth $50—when you can find them. This book will be a normal-size, cloth-bound volume of about 380 pages and will be turned out in a limited edition. It will include the Morrow catalog of 1864, 34 pages; Peabody of 1865, 18 pages; Peabody of 1866, 26 pages; Henry of 1865, 50 pages; Spencer of 1866, 38 pages; National of 1865, 4 pages; Folsom of 1869, 8 pages; Great Western of 1871, 44 pages; James Bown, 1876, 70 pages; and Homer Fisher of 1880, 82 pages. The price will be $4.00 in advance of publication and $4.50 afterward.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

Up in Alaska, the great Yukon River Valley comprises a huge, extensive gold-bearing territory. In this sparsely populated section, which is a frozen white waste much of the time, airplanes and modern caterpillar-tractor-drawn sled trains vie with the old-fashioned dog team in affording the only adequate transportation into the back country for man and his mining needs.

Fundamentally, Alaska constitutes American's last frontier. Spotted through the Yukon Valley from one end to the other are the placer-gold camps of the hardy, adventurous prospectors who prefer to do their gold hunting beyond the outermost fringe of a spreading civilization.

H. K., of Syracuse, New York, knowing full well it will be on into late spring before he can make his long-contemplated prospecting trip to that country, has, nevertheless, written us recently concerning gold areas in the Yukon River basin, his projected destination. H. K. believes that all the data he can get *before* he starts will help him just that much when he sets forth on his long trip to the Far North. Which same is good sound reasoning, we opine, and a practice we invariably recommend, whether the gold seeker's destination be Alaska, Arizona or way points in between.

"Alaska as a place to live and prospect for gold has long been my goal," says H. K.'s letter. "This spring I shall be ready to pull up stakes and make my start. How about the Yukon River Valley? I mean the part that is in Alaska on the American side of the line, and not the Klondike which is Canadian. Can you tell me some of the different gold-placer mining districts there, and if, in your opinion, that is a good general part of Alaska to go? I would like to get all the dope I can before I start."

Well, H. K., in the past, as the United States Geological Survey will bear us out in its Bulletin 897-A on the mineral resources of Alaska, placer gold—or at least colors—has been found in virtually every stream in the entire vast Yukon basin. That is a mighty broad statement covering a whale of a big section of country, which is why we backed it up with sound governmental authority, even though we would be willing to go out on a limb with it on our own say-so, anyhow.

Not all the streams, naturally, have turned up placer gold in quantities sufficient to make attempting to work them a profitable project. That would be asking too much, even of a country as tremendously rich in gold mineralization as Alaska.

On the other hand, neither have all the streams and their tributaries yet been prospected from end to end as thoroughly as they might have

been were they more accessibly situated. Moreover, it takes relatively richer ground to make a paying proposition in Alaska than it does closer to civilization, where living costs are not so high and the country not climatically so severe. Yet in spite of these handicaps many of the scattered gold camps in the Yukon basin have proved, and are still proving, bonanza set-ups for their finders and the miners operating in them.

The placer-gold output of this section of Alaska, one of the most active in that country today, probably runs well over the *ten-million-dollar* mark annually. Though the bulk of the production nowadays comes from the larger-scale operations, bucket dredges, et cetera, there are also a lot of drag-line and bulldozer outfits working, and in the back country up there, more, perhaps, than in any other single region of Alaska, two and four-man small-scale groups have been giving the Yukon basin area a play and getting good results.

The actual placer-gold districts up there are widespread. There is the country around Fairbanks, of course. And the Iditarod River. The old districts of Circle and Fortymile. Then there is the Ruby district and the rivers and creeks tributary to them in behind Ruby on the banks of the Yukon. Farther down, there is the country around Marshall below Russian Mission. North of the Yukon, above Flats, is the Chandalar River district. There is also the Koyukuk River, with plenty of wild, little-explored country along and adjacent to its course. In fact, the Koyukuk sector alone takes in three large, widely separated placer districts in which gold has been found and mined. They are the Indian Creek-Hughes area in the middle part of the river valley, the Hogatza River country north of Hughes, and the Koyukuk itself, and the auriferous region around the headwaters of the Koyukuk north of the little mining settlement of Bettles. Incidentally, in connection with this northern part of the Koyukuk Valley, because of the virtually nonexistent transportation facilities available for getting in, unless by air, the chances are that its real gold possibilities have, even today, been only sketchily exploited and explored.

And that last statement, H. K., applies to much of the back, off-the-trail country in the entire Yukon Valley gold field.

To K. G. V., of Montgomery, Alabama, who also has a query on Alaska he wants answered: Yes, as is the case with most placers, there is some silver occurring in all the placer gold recovered in Alaska. The silver does not appear as a separate metal, however, but is intimately alloyed with the gold itself in the dust or nuggets. It is only after the gold has been refined that the silver is actually recovered. The total value of the silver obtained from this source is relatively small, perhaps forty or fifty thousand dollars' worth annually.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Well, folks, the New Year is well on its way now and by this time you've probably all broken those good resolutions you made New Year's Eve. But there's one we hope you all made and *kept*—and that is to make as many friends as possible during the coming year. If you have everything else in the world but friends, you're liable to be pretty discontented, and if you have nothing else but friends, you've plenty to keep you happy. So here are lots more friends for you this week, among them Geoffrey whose letter is below. He writes:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an English boy sixteen years old and should be glad to hear from anyone in the United States. I want to come to America as soon as possible, but I can't afford it yet, and it's a long way to swim. Till I can come, how about some of you exchanging letters, snaps, pictures and newspapers with me? There are many interesting things in England about which I can tell you. This town I live in is over eighteen hundred years old, there are houses standing that were built in 1650, and there is a wall around the city dating back to the Roman invasion. I am a film fan and collect any kind of film magazine I can get hold of, and also like dancing and music. I'll answer all letters, so please write.—Geoffrey Robinson, 23 Charles Street, Hoole, Chester, England

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Jeanne wants sincere pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young girl fifteen years old and am considered good-natured and fun-loving and I would like to hear from everyone from any country. My favorite sports are active ones and my hobby is writing letters and collecting friends from all over the world. I promise faithfully to answer all who write to me, but please be sincere.—Jean Abner, 3321A Itaska Street, St. Louis, Missouri

Sheep herding appeals to Frank—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-nine years old and love to write letters. I would like to have lots of Pen Pals, especially from Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. I enjoy taking care of sheep and cattle and would very much like a job like that. At present I am unemployed. I promise to answer all letters and will try to make mine long and interesting.—Frank Pepilinski, c/o Paul Siegfried, Bemis, South Dakota

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Margaret likes strenuous exercise—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old and would like some Pen Pals. I enjoy all active sports like tennis, handball, swimming and volley ball. I want to hear from boys and girls from all over the world and I promise to answer all letters.—Margaret Farrell, 914 Cross Bay Boulevard, Broad Channel, New York

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George is a linguist with a capital "L"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Can another Canadian join the ol' Hollow Tree? I hope so, as I want pen friends from all over the world and I promise to answer all letters received. I am forty years old and can read and write ten languages. I would like to hear from the following places: Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Central and South America, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Canary, Hawaiian and Philippine islands. Everyone else is welcome to write, too. You can write to me in Spanish, Portuguese, Flemish, Italian, French, Austrian, Hawaiian, German or English. Come on, folks, and make my mailman work hard.—George Harris, c/o Mr. W. McCallum, R. R. No. 1, Denfield, Ontario, Canada

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Be sure this letter is answered—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-four years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals between twenty-four and

thirty. I have answered some letters published in the Hollow Tree, but haven't had any replies. I sure hope to get me some Pen Pals now, though, so come on, folks, and write to me from everywhere.—Mrs. Marge Helmer, Boerne, Texas

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Palmer's tales should make interesting reading—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am in the coast-guard service and have had many experiences and thrills which I would like to share with anyone who is interested enough to write. I have plenty of spare time to answer all letters, and my chief hobby is corresponding. Come on, all you guys and gals, and let's swap letters, pictures, experiences or what have you!—A. Palmer Haley, U. S. S. *Mendota*, C. G., Norfolk, Virginia

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The wild-and-woolly West interests Vesna—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is a request from a girl who'd like to hear from anyone and everyone between the ages of fifteen and twenty. I like singing, dancing, sports and music. I would especially like to hear from wild and woolly Westerners, but everyone is welcome. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots, so hurry and write, everyone, and remember I'll be watching the mailbox!—Vesna Marinkovich, Aratapu, North Auckland, New Zealand

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Burton wants his mailman to work hard—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I hope the Hollow Tree has a little more room in it so that I can get my letter in. I'd like to have plenty of Pen Pals and I guarantee to answer all letters. I am twenty-eight years old, very interested in photography, flying, horseback riding, reading and writing. Our mailbox is quite large and the mailman loves to work, so get out your paper and pen and keep that mailman plenty busy.—Burton L. Wollenzien, 2439 N. 48th Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Marie will trade plants—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I love flowers, and growing and caring for them is my hobby. I have over one hundred house plants and would like to trade with friends in Pennsylvania. I have some dahlia bulbs to trade, too, so come on, all you flower lovers, and write to me.—Marie Lucas, Rt. No. 2, Brookville, Pennsylvania

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And here's a rare hobby—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to have some Pen Pals. I live on Bodega Bay, California, and enjoy the outdoors. I go sea-shell hunting and fishing a lot. There are clams, crabs, smelts, perch, flounders, salmon and codfish. I sell sea shells at one dollar a box or will trade them. This is a wonderful climate and there are lots of redwoods near here. I hope to hear from a lot of folks.—Mrs. L. M. Odell, Bodega Bay, Sonoma County, California

Write to Schuyler and cheer him up—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Hello, everybody, everywhere! Won't you drop a line to a lonely young man? I am twenty-two years old and work as a janitor in a broadcasting station. I am interested in reading, movies, dancing, and the radio. Again I repeat, won't you drop a line to a lonely young man in a small town?—Schuyler Hill, Box 556, Centralia, Washington

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From Texas comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all parts of the United States and Canada. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone. I am eighteen years old and like all sports. Come on, boys and girls, I would like to hear from you.—Private Harding Cartwright, Battery F, 77th Field Artillery, Fort D. A. Russell, Marfa, Texas

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Ella Jane likes sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an eighteen-year-old girl and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the United States. I am interested in all sports including tennis, skating and swimming. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Ella Jane Burger, 561 Cody Avenue, South East, Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Leon has the wanderlust—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-five years of age and would like Pen Pals from anywhere. My hobby is reading and my ambition is to travel. I will exchange letters, magazines, snapshots or anything else my Pen Pals find interesting. I hope my request will be answered.—Leon Anderson, 262 N. California Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

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Mary and her pal want to hear from cowboys—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from boys and girls between sixteen and twenty-six, especially cowboys and cowgirls. I will exchange photos and books. My girl friend, Edna, is seventeen years old and she, too, would like to hear from some cowboys. She loves horses and is a good rider. —Mary Lyon, Gate House, Eulomogo, New South Wales, Australia, and Edna Hardy, Avondale, Walgett, New South Wales, Australia

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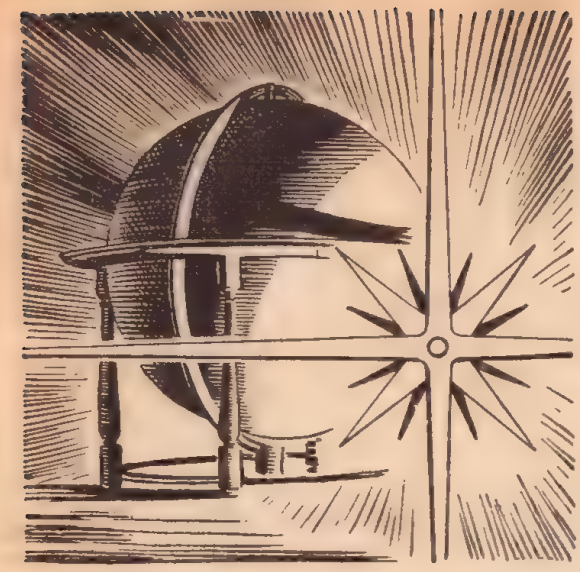
Letters from the West wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have heard much of the success of your famous Hollow Tree, and so I am entering my plea for Pen Pals. I am a young man of seventeen and am interested in sports and science. I do all the things a normal person would do. I'd like to hear from friends from the West, ones who live on ranches and love the outdoors. I plan to join the navy and would like some Western friends who are planning to do the same.—Nick Pillus, Box 445, Port Jefferson, New York



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

CALIFORNIA and, of course, Hollywood, always seem to hold interest for the tourist," B. R., a Missouri reader, writes. "Friends of mine tell me a lot about their trips to California, but when I asked them what they saw around Los Angeles and Hollywood they became pretty vague. They must travel with those black glasses the movie folks wear. Anyway, I'm headed out that way, and I'd like to have a list of things to see while in and around Los Angeles. Will you help me out?"

I'll give you a straight-from-the-shoulder list, B. R., which you can follow as exactly as you please, and I'll go further and make it alphabetical, so it will be easy for you to study it. Here goes:

You might start out with an airship ride over Los Angeles and Hollywood in the airship *Volunteer*. You'll find it making trips every fifteen minutes from the field at Sixth Street and Fairfax Avenue. This experience will give you a first over-all picture of the community you want to explore in more detail.

There is a famous Arabian horse farm between Pomona and Colvina, suburbs of Los Angeles, where you will find some of the world's finest horseflesh. Many of the animals have appeared in motion pictures.

The Bernheimer Gardens are located on the Pacific Palisades. These gardens are beautifully landscaped and decorated with miniature Japanese statuary in bronze. Nearly three million dollars have been spent on this eight-acre garden and its buildings of Japanese architecture. You will find the entrance at Sunset Boulevard and Marquez Street.

If you like rare plants and trees and flowers, head out to Pasadena and visit the Busch Gardens, seventy-five acres of exotic splendor on the slopes of the picturesque Arroyo Seco. You will find the entrance by driving to 959 South Grand Street, Pasadena.

Or maybe you will like wild and ferocious, but well-caged, animals. Then head for the California Zoölogical Park at 3800 Mission Road, where you will find the largest collection of wild animals on the Pacific coast, kept in as nearly as possible the natural surroundings of their native stamping grounds.

Maybe, after reading about so many adobe houses in fiction, you would like to see one of the real things. At 4607 Pasadena Avenue,

Readers who would like a descriptive booklet on Los Angeles of interest to tourists should write me, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope. A list of free books on the section will be mailed free of charge.

opposite Sycamore Grove, you can visit a beautiful old ranchhouse of sun-dried adobe, an authentic reproduction inside and out of a Spanish *hacienda* of the early nineteenth century.

Exposition Park is a beautiful 130-acre park with nine acres of sunken gardens. Here you will find the California State Exposition Building, containing exhibits of the resources and industries of California, the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art, with many famous art collections and also fossil remains of prehistoric animals taken from the Rancho la Brea, and the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, seating over a hundred thousand people, one of the greatest structures of its kind.

Griffith Park and Griffith Park Planetarium cover an area of 5,752 acres. Here you will find many miles of bridle paths, picnic grounds, a bird sanctuary and a spectacular fern dell where tree ferns rise to amazing heights. The planetarium is the newest and one of the most renowned in the country.

A person visiting a new section of the country should examine its industrial sights, and in Los Angeles you should visit the citrus and walnut packing plants, the tuna-fish packing plants, olive curing and packing plants, the pottery factories, et cetera.

Having seen the fossils at Exposition Park, you should run out to the La Brea Pits on Wilshire Boulevard between La Brea and Fairfax. In these pits have been found the bones of animals which bogged down there thousands of years before, like cattle in quicksand.

Then if you want a beautiful drive which will give you a splendid view of the cities and surrounding country, drive up Lookout Mountain. Many movie people have built homes in this canyon and on its roads.

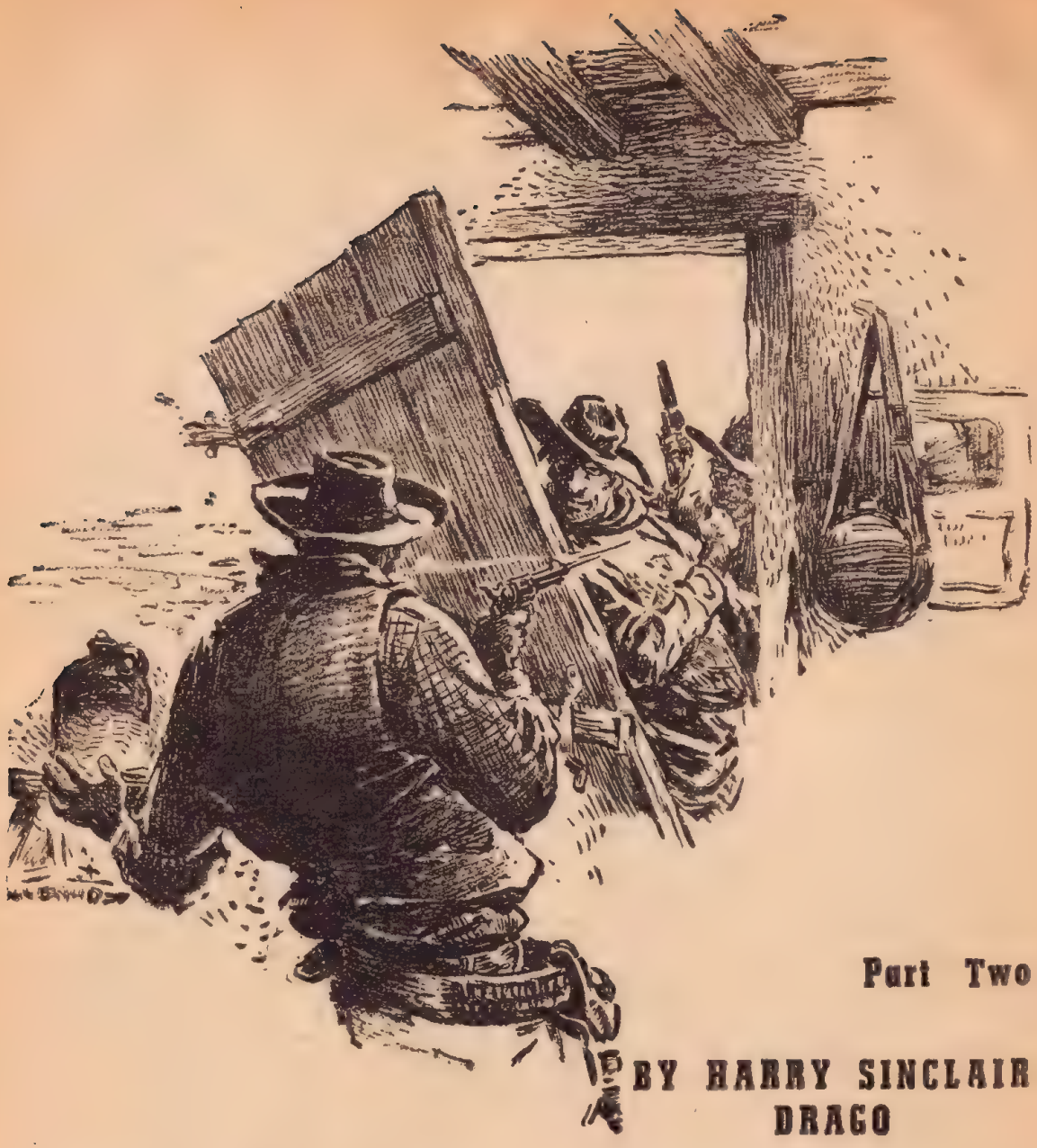
Lyon's Pony Express Museum in Arcadia is well worth the trip to this suburb. As its name suggests, it is an interesting and valuable collection of relics identified with the activities of the famous Pony Express, which was the first mail route to California in the gold-rush days.

Among other places we can't describe for lack of room, but which should be visited, are Redondo Beach, with its salt-water tank big enough to hold five thousand people; Santa Anita Park, the scene of winter racing at Arcadia; the Southwest Museum, containing historical documents and exhibits on the building of the Southwest, located at Marmion Way and Museum Drive. One should also go to Terminal Island to see the Fish Harbor, where twelve hundred fishing boats dock, and by all means visit the United States fleet at Los Angeles-Long Beach harbor. The ships may be boarded on Sundays and holidays.

In visiting the above places of interest, you will learn about others which will have special interest for you, but the ones I have listed will keep you busy for a while.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Adress all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Part Two

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Ghosts OF THE RIMROCK

The Story So Far:

A party of archæologists heads for Pueblo Grande to make a study of Indian ruins. Their work is secretly opposed by the Wu-tai-shan Company, an importing firm which also operates a gambling establishment in Reno run by Carlotta Soong, a beautiful half-caste.

Slade Salters, Carlotta's attorney, who has learned something of the secret activities of the company, is convinced that the Chinese are working a gold mine somewhere near the Pueblo Grande ruins. He hires three men to follow the expedition and investigate.

Jim Morningstar, the expedition's guide,

runs into trouble from the very start. A knife thrown into the campfire around which the expedition members sit bears a warning to "Go back!" Bill Merriam, one of the scientists, disappears and is later found bound and gagged in an underground kiva. All he remembers is a guttural voice warning him "not to disturb the dead," a reference apparently to several skeletons found among the ruins. To top these happenings off, Doy Kee, a Chinese cook supplied by Carlotta Soong, is mysteriously murdered.

Dr. Birdsall, the head of the group, refuses to take Jim Morningstar's advice and disband the expedition, and next morning it is found that Jennifer Orme, the only woman in the party, has disappeared from her quarters.

CHAPTER V

AGAIN THE DRAGON

"Yo're dead right about somethin' goin' on out there in the desert, Salters. I can swear to that!" Tip Slaughter shoved his hat back and mopped his broad red brow. "About the mine, we dunno yet, but it don't sound half as crazy as it did before."

"Tell me what you've learned," Slade Salters demanded with poorly concealed eagerness.

They were gathered in a dusty adobe saloon run by a Mexican at the lower end of Piute's dusty, weathered street, as had been planned two weeks ago: Salters, Slaughter, Snap Clanton, and Cagle. Pablo Gonzales, who ran the place, was sprawled in the corner, asleep. There was no one else to overhear their low-voiced conversation.

"We picked up them relic hunters here in town, like yuh said," Slaughter replied. "Trailed 'em out to Pueblo Grande. That wasn't no mistake, either. There's shore been plenty goin' on out there. So dang much that the whole outfit's picked up an' is on its way back right now!"

Slade's alert, dark eyes snapped with interest as Tip told all that had happened to the expedition from the time a knife had been thrown into camp with what was plainly a warning attached, through the cave-in at the pueblo, Merriam's abduction, following the pursuit of themselves, and the murder of the Chinese cook. Salters followed the tale closely, and at its end asked several curt questions.

"Who was it snagged Merriam?" he queried.

Tip shrugged. "We didn't see that. But I reckon it was the chinks."

"Were you spotted by anybody except Morningstar and his crowd?"

"Not that I know of. But there's an awful creepy feelin' about that country, Slade!" He rubbed his hands on his thighs uneasily. "Makes yuh feel like the ghost was walkin' and—"

Salters brushed this aside brusquely. "Then you agree with me that my hunch was right?"

"If yuh mean there's prob'ly a mine out there somewheres—yes. Nothin' else would rile up even the chinks so much."

Slade made no attempt to hide his satisfaction. For half an hour they talked the situation over, trying to hit on a means of definitely locating the mine. They were still at it when Salters suddenly exclaimed, lowly and forcefully: "Hold it a minute!" He was staring toward the window. The others followed suit in time to see a slowly moving hat pass by the high mud sill of the window. A moment later they saw the same thing at the other window. Tip relaxed.

"Shucks, that ain't nothin'—jest some Mex peddler or somethin'."

Salters, however, was leaving nothing to chance. Moving quietly to the door, he jerked it open and collared the man he found sitting on the doorstep. It was an old, wrin-

kle-faced Chinese with a basket of vegetables on his arm. Slade hauled him inside.

"What's the big idea, John?" he demanded. "What were you sitting there for?"

The old man blinked at him stolidly. "Me no sabby," he said. Salters wanted to shake him violently. Instead he threw questions in a tone of angry authority. None of them got him anywhere. Finally he gave up in disgust.

"Oh, hell, kick him out!" he said impatiently. "We'll never get anything from him."

Snap Clanton attended to it, landing the man in the dust outside, his basket rolling. Philosophically, the Chinese picked himself and his vegetables up, and shuffled away.

But Salters was still suspicious. "Don't make any mistake about it," he warned. "These chinks are a slick bunch! That old bird may've been spying on us. I've worked for his kind too long to be fooled by anything!" He went on to explain something of the ramifications of the Wu-tai-shan Company, voicing his belief that every Chinaman in the State was secretly working in unison. What Slaughter and his companions had seen in the desert was more than enough to convince them he was right. They were still on the subject when Bart Cagle, on watch at the window, exclaimed:

"Boys, here's Morningstar's whole outfit! They're pullin' into town now!"

The others were soon at the window. They watched the arrival of the Flagler expedition, with its long line of pack horses. Jim Morningstar and Dr. Birdsall rode at its head. Salter's eyes blazed up at the sight.

"You were dead right, Tip!" he said with a grim smile. "Sure enough, they're pullin' out, lock, stock an' barrel! This is a break for us!"

"Hold on," Slaughter grunted. "Where's that girl they had with 'em?"

Jennifer Orme *was* absent. There could be no doubt of it. Salters turned it over for a moment in his mind; but it was Snap Clanton who jerked out: "By gravy, the chinks've got 'er, that's what! That's why these hombres pulled out!"

UNAWARE of interested eyes, watching his every move alertly, Morningstar led the expedition to the weathered, two-story Piute Hotel. There the scientists dismounted dispiritedly. Sulphur and the punchers took care of the horses, while Dave Sprague, Stubbs, and Hans Krock wandered into the hotel bar. Dr. Birdsall turned to Jim.

"I suppose the best thing is to see the sheriff at once, Morningstar?"

Jim nodded. "We'll go down to his office right now." He and the doctor started that way; and Bill Merriam, looking haggard but determined, accompanied them. Jim didn't ask why. He had long since come to understand Merriam's interest in Jennifer Orme.

Huck Mulhall, the sheriff, had his office in the building that housed the jail. Jim was the first through the door, but there was nobody in the office except a Chinese boy, busy cleaning up the place.

"Where can I find Mulhall?"

"Shellif no here," the Oriental said glibly. "China boy hurt at Laftel O Lanch. Shellif back tomollow mebby."

"Then where's his deputy?"

"No dleputy," was the answer. Jim got the idea that the boy was secretly anxious to get rid of them. However, there was nothing more

to be got out of him. Jim and the others turned away. Dr. Birdsall was frowning.

"It seems strange that this should happen just now," he remarked, as they headed for the hotel.

Jim agreed:

"I can't remember seeing a chink around the place before."

"No, no," Birdsall said impatiently. "I mean it's particularly unfortunate about the sheriff being away—"

"Doctor," Jim interposed, "I think the best thing for you and the others to do is to pull out and go back to Reno. I intend to do everything possible to bring Miss Orme back, safe and unharmed."

"But it's our duty to help," the doctor exclaimed. "Miss Orme has been with me before; she's more than just a fellow scientist to me. Anything I can do—"

"That's it," Jim said quietly. "You can't do anything. You'll only be in the way."

Birdsall sighed. He was not an unreasonable man. "We'll go, then. I understand there's a stage in the morning."

"You and the others may go," Bill Merriam struck in, tenseness in his voice. "But I'm staying!"

That was scarcely a surprise to Jim, and he made no attempt to dissuade Merriam. "I'll see you all down at the hotel shortly," he said, and turned away.

It was his intention to have a talk with Sulphur Riley, but as he headed for the livery to which the punchers had gone, he noted, approaching him, the Chinese who had been at the jail. The boy came up with purpose in his manner, and halted before him. It was sufficient of a surprise in itself to make Jim wary, but his eyes opened even wider, and then narrowed to slits, when the Oriental guardedly opened the fingers of one hand to reveal a small carved dragon lying on his palm. It was the exact replica of the one Jim carried.

The latter was little interested in mysteries just now, however. Looking the other full in the eye, he grunted: "What?"

"You want I help you? Come with me," was the answer. With superb self-assurance, the speaker turned and started down the street. Jim followed, more out of grim curiosity than anything else. He knew how futile questions would be. But convinced as he was that the Chinese were at the bottom of Jennifer's disappearance, anything interested him which led in that direction.

JIM'S guide took him to a Chinese grocery store, presided over by a fat, bland-faced Oriental. There was a brief colloquy in singsong Chinese, and then the grocer said to Morningstar, "You come."

Jim followed him to the rear of the store. A door in a dusky hall gave upon a small rear room showing the evidence of frugal living. From the rear window the view was all of sun-grayed sagebrush and distant desert ranges, as Jim was careful to check. But even as he turned away from the window, a door opened softly. He whirled sharply, and then held his breath. Carlotta Soong stood there before him.

"Why are you here?" he demanded, surprise putting an edge on his tone. In her tailored suit, she looked more white than Chinese.

"I've been waiting for you, Jim," the girl said quietly. "Is this my welcome?"

It crossed his mind in a flash that if she had been awaiting him, and knew he was coming, then she must know why he had come.

"Then you and your friends *were* behind all that's happened," he said with no softening of his tone. "Carlotta, I want to know what has happened to Jennifer Orme."

Something intense flashed behind the girl's dark eyes, to be gone immediately. But she could not hide from herself the sudden sharp pain she felt at the evidence of this man's interest in another woman. It was this that kept her silent.

"I remember your warnings," Jim went on rather bitterly. "I'm afraid you were well informed. That cave-in at Pueblo Grande was no accident. Surely that was far enough to go in your effort to protect the Chinese graves there in the ruins. And killing Doy Kee—"

"You must believe me when I say that was a mistake," Carlotta broke in calmly. "There were white men in the hills who were thought to be a part of your party. It meant that Doy Kee had failed us. I would never have gone that far, Jim—but mine is not the only voice."

Morningstar gazed at her, trying to read her secret. "Am I to gather that you're a member of some all-powerful secret society—some tong or brotherhood?" He shook his head. "It sounds incredible, and yet it's been my secret thought ever since I picked this up." He held out to her the broken pieces of the little jade figurine he had found beside Doy Kee's body.

"Obviously," he continued, "the little dragon is the secret symbol of your organization. Fail it, and the token is broken. Is that it?"

There was no reading the expression on Carlotta's face. She fingered the broken bits of jade for a moment before depositing them in front of the little joss that sat on a shelf in the corner of the room. "I gave you the little dragon as a talisman, a good-luck piece. In your case, it has no other significance. You can hardly say it has failed you. As for Doy Kee, I can only repeat that his death was a mistake. He was my friend, and really a great scholar; not the humble cook you took him to be." She measured Morningstar with her dark, beautiful eyes. "I am almost tempted to answer your questions," she murmured. "I know you would respect my confidence."

Their eyes held for a long moment.

"I wonder if I could," he said. "I know your hand is in many things. The very convenient absence of the sheriff, for instance."

"Nothing has happened to Sheriff Mulhall," she said without interest.

"Making away with Mulhall might be going a little too far," he said. His sarcasm was wasted on Carlotta. There was something impregnable about this girl. He felt nettled with himself. He was not used to feeling unequal to a situation. In quite a different tone, he said: "Who were those men on the desert—the three who were mistaken for our people?"

"They'll be discouraged," she said and made no attempt to temper her evasion.

"But why?" Jim burst out. "What's behind it all? Let's be done with all this mystery!"

Carlotta's eyes blazed up, dark and warm and dangerous. Unconsciously she leaned toward him in the sudden intensity of her feeling. "Jim, almost twenty years ago at Union City, Dan Morningstar led an attack on the Chinese miners there—not because a white man was killed, but because a white woman, a Mexican girl, had dared to marry a Chinese. They were driven into the desert in the dead of winter, young men and old men, and even women! That

Mexican girl carried a baby. She saw her husband drop, wounded, unable to crawl farther. Two days later, she died—out on the open desert. But the baby was saved—I am that baby."

Carlotta looked at him long and inscrutably. "And you, Jim, are Dan Morningstar's son," she said almost in a whisper. "I ought to hate you, but I . . . I find it rather impossible." She broke off as if struggling with forces she was unable to control.

MORNINGSTAR was surprised and moved by this story of cruelty and injustice, and he did not try to hide the fact. Much of the story was not new to him. "My father died regretting his part in that affair," he said. "Hatreds were aflame in this State in those days that would shame any man. Times have changed, thank God. Nothing like that could happen today."

"I sometimes wonder," Carlotta murmured tremulously. "I was raised and educated by my father's friends. When I was sent back East to school, I was quickly made to realize what my lot was to be." Emotion caught her for the moment, then again she seemed inscrutable. "Perhaps you can understand why I refer to the Chinese as my people. I've dedicated my life to serving them."

She told him she had organized the Wu-tai-shan Company, and something about its ramifications.

"We've been careful to give it the appearance of being just an importing firm," she continued. "Actually, it goes much further."

"You mean it's a tong—a secret society?" he asked.

"It's co-operative, in a way that a tong never could be, though we patterned it after the original Five Companies. What we own, we own together. We've been satisfied to take only what white men found worthless and never asked anything but to be left to ourselves. Apparently, that was too much to ask." Her tone was bitter.

"I'm beginning to understand," Jim told her. "In some mysterious way, a number of Chinese have found it possible to grub a living out of this desert country to the south."

"Obviously," she admitted.

"And those graves in the Pueblo Grande, are they the graves of the people who were driven out of Union City so long ago?"

"Yes, though most of them have been returned to China."

"Then am I to understand that the disappearance of Miss Orme and all the rest of our troubles are due to the fact that we disturbed those graves?" he persisted.

Carlotta had foreseen the question and was ready for it. "Jim, you will have to accept it as the only reason," she said with unassailable dignity. "As for Miss Orme, I will take you to her. The law has no place in this matter. This must be between you and me."

A thought ran through Morningstar that brought him up short. Was this a trap? Did Carlotta intend to lead him into the same blind alley into which Jennifer had disappeared?

But there were other forces than caution at work in him. From the moment Carlotta Soong had stepped into this room he had been conscious of the strange tug she had for him. Again he caught himself thinking how desirable she was. She liked him; that was plain. Her saying that she ought to hate him was proof enough that she did not. The charm of her manner, her warm lips, the deep mystery of her eyes, the

rounded whiteness of her arms, were not lost on him.

"I've got to trust her," he told himself soberly. "There's no other way out of this." Aloud, he said: "How long will this take?"

"It may take a week."

He thought it over. A week was a long time to waste, if he wasn't sure what he was doing. "Dr. Merriam has a very personal interest in anything that concerns Miss Orme," he told her. "He'll have to be consulted if the sheriff is to be kept out of this."

Carlotta's lips curved at his mention of Merriam's interest in Jennifer Orme. "Convince him—without saying too much," she advised. "I know you will use discretion." And then, like a cry for understanding: "Jim, why are you making it so hard for me to help you?"

Morningstar moved his high shoulders restlessly. A battle went on in him. Jennifer seemed infinitely remote now. Carlotta, with her perfect oval face and the mystery and allure of an ancient race in her dark eyes, the long curve of her lips warm with the blood of her Mexican mother, her skin as smooth and flawless as ivory, affected him like some exotic perfume. He shook off its spell.

"I'll go with you," he said abruptly. "When shall we start?"

"You may come for me early in the morning," she answered, her voice soft and proud. "I will be waiting."

CHAPTER VI

GAMBLER'S GAME

MORNINGSTAR met Bill Merriam in the street not a hundred yards from Chun Ga's store. The ornithologist nodded soberly. "I was wondering what had become of you," he said.

"Merriam," Jim gave it to him straight from the shoulder, "I'm pull-

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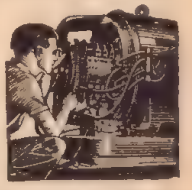

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ing out in the morning. When I return, I'll have Miss Orme with me, I hope."

Merriam's mood lifted with his surprise. Then he hesitated, obviously skeptical. "Do you mind explaining?" he asked.

Jim gave him the gist of his agreement with Carlotta, referring to her simply as a representative of the Chinese.

"Why, this is fantastic, Morningstar!" Merriam burst out at the end. "You don't honestly expect to follow out any such mad plan, do you? You'll never get Miss Orme back that way!"

"I think I will, if the sheriff is left out of the picture. If you insist on calling in the law, there's no use in my starting out. It's something we must decide now."

"Leaving the sheriff out of this and letting a week pass sounds foolhardy to me," Merriam insisted. "Suppose we discuss it with Birdsall."

"We can," Jim agreed, "but I would rather not. He'll be leaving in the morning. It's what you and I think about this that's important. What can Mulhall do if you call him in? Swear out a posse and go scouring the hills. That's all. I can do that. A show of force might not help Miss Orme. We want her back safe, unharmed. I think I know what she means to you, Merriam. Believe me, I wouldn't be suggesting this course if I thought there was a better way."

Merriam, nerve-twisted, desperate, gave in reluctantly.

"If you'll let me have a horse, I'll ride for an hour or two," he said. "I've got to pull myself together."

At the barn, they found Sulphur. The latter walked up the street with Jim as Merriam rode off. They were just mounting the hotel steps when a man, emerging, bumped into Jim accidentally. Both turned and Jim found himself face to face with Slade Salters!

"Howdy, Salters," he exclaimed in surprise. "I hardly expected to meet you here in Piute."

With the suave and pleasant bearing that had helped him so often in his business, Salters laughingly excused his clumsiness, and then said: "Some legal work brought me down for a few days. I'm sorry to hear the expedition is calling off its work at Pueblo Grande."

Jim nodded. "The doctor and his friends don't take to the idea very kindly. But they're starting back for Reno in the morning."

Salters' brows rose. "Not losing any time, eh? Then I'll have company on the stage to Sodaville. My work here is about cleaned up and I'm leaving tomorrow myself."

It was Jim's turn to evince surprise. He returned it with interest. "I thought you were here on Miss Soong's business," he said. "She didn't mention it, but seeing you both here in town, I naturally supposed—"

SOMETHING crossed Salters' face which would have been difficult to define. Jim caught the question trembling on his lips, even though the attorney caught himself before voicing it. "No, a lawyer has a good many irons in the fire," Salters said with another laugh. "As a one-time cattleman, you ought to know what that means!" He passed on down the steps and strolled up the street with the appearance of having nothing whatever on his mind. But Jim was not deceived. He didn't know what it signified, but Slade Salters had received a jolt which he had not been able wholly to hide.

Even Sulphur sensed that. "By

gravy, it set Salters back on his heels for some reason to have yuh tell him that gal is in town!" he exclaimed, as the two of them watched the attorney pass on up the plank sidewalk. "It's a cinch he didn't know it before yuh spoke, Jim. What yuh reckon is the meanin' of that?"

"At a glance, I'd say they were working at cross purposes," Jim responded thoughtfully. "I know it doesn't make sense, but there's a big stake up there in the rimrock or the Fortifications somewhere. That's growing plainer and plainer!"

"Yeah. An' there's danger up there, too," Sulphur grunted, with a dour look on his long face.

Jim shot him a look:

"You're not suggesting we pull away now, are you?"

"Hell, no," Sulphur said immediately.

They watched as Salters paused before the dingy office of a local lawyer, some distance down the street, and then stepped in. They would have been interested to watch his procedure once he disappeared through the door. He spent a moment talking with the lawyer, but when he made ready to leave, it was toward the rear door that he turned. A glance at his face as he made his way along the rear of the buildings would have told that there was plenty on his mind.

Reaching Pablo Gonzales' saloon, Salters entered and ran lightly up the rear stairs. Tip Slaughter and his companions were lounging in an untidy bedroom overlooking the front of the building. They broke off a card game to gaze at him expectantly as he entered.

"Boys," he began harshly, "here's one for the book! The Empress is in town!"

They expressed their surprise in muttered exclamations. "Danged if she don't git around!" Snap Clanton burst out. "What'd yuh do, Slade, run plumb into 'er?"

Salters shook his head. "I don't even know where she is. Morningstar just happened to drop the remark that he was with her—"

"Morningstar, eh?" Slaughter's eyes narrowed. "Why, I seen that hombre an' some chink steppin' into this here Chun Ga's grocery store a while go—"

"Then that's where she is," Clanton interposed. He seemed sure of the fact, but Salters gave them all a slow look.

"We've got to know definitely," he said. Clanton's broken-toothed grin flashed out.

"Ain't gittin' panicky, are yuh?" he demanded.

Salters shook his head in a curt negative. "I've got more on my mind than that," he said flatly. "Carlotta's being here doesn't look so good for us. We've simply got to find out where she is, and grab her." He was laying his plans, examining them, turning them over and over, as he talked. "This isn't as bad as it might be, at that. For one thing, if there's anything above that pueblo, we'll make her show us where it is! But first we've got to make sure of where to find her, so you boys can get her away—"

"How we goin' to do that?" Bart Cagle demanded.

"You'll have to crawl up through the brush behind Chun Ga's place and watch the windows."

They stared at him, plainly reluctant. "That won't be so good, Slade," Clanton began. "Them chinks—"

Salters gave him a hard grin. "Don't tell me that now, Snap. You're not getting panicky, are you?" he repeated the man's own gibe of a few minutes before.

Slaughter snorted his dry amusement. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll make sure of the Empress. If we land in a jackpot doin' it, it'll be up to you to drag us out!"

There was more talk of ways and means, and then the three renegades drifted out and down the stairs to the street. Salters made no attempt to check on their activities, for this was work of a kind they were better fitted to handle than he.

It was Tip Slaughter who took the initiative. At his direction, they saddled up and rode out of town toward the south. A mile out of Piute, they circled back by means of a dry wash, dismounting and leaving their ponies several hundred yards from the street. Then they crawled up through the sage, making for the rear of the Chinese store. From a safe distance they took up the watch on the grocery. But the afternoon dragged past and they saw nothing to indicate that the girl they sought was within.

Sunset drew a flaming mantle over the desert and slowly faded out. When night began to thicken lights appeared in the rear windows, but shades had been pulled down.

"We'll have to bust into that place yet to find out what we wanta know," Clanton grunted disgustedly.

But Slaughter was not so hasty. "We'll jest keep a close watch fer a while," he said in a low voice. "Yuh never can tell what'll turn up."

They prowled about the place, being careful not to come too close to the chicken yards. Once Cagle stumbled over an unseen obstacle and measured his length on the ground noisily. He was sharply reprimanded by Slaughter. For a long time they saw nothing of interest. Even Slaughter was beginning to wonder whether their vigil would prove fruitless, when suddenly Clanton grasped his arm.

"Take a squint," Clanton jerked out, keeping his voice down. "There —at that second window!"

Slaughter did as he was directed. For a moment he saw nothing. Then a shadow moved across the lighted shade, trim and small—the shadow of a woman. Cagle saw it, too.

"It's her!" he exclaimed. "It can't be nobody else. These chinks don't have no women in this country."

EVEN Slaughter was satisfied that he was right. He thought a minute. "Snap, you and Bart keep a watch here," he directed then. "I'll hustle back an' tell Slade."

Turning away, he made haste to reach the attorney in the room above Pablo Gonzales' place. Salters was waiting impatiently. He gave a start as Slaughter entered.

"Well, what about it?" he demanded.

"We've found her. She was at that chink grocery, all right. Better get down there right off, Slade."

Salters grunted. He was ready to start in a matter of minutes.

"What about these chinks?" Slaughter went on, as they passed down the stairs and into the night darkness. "They goin' to give us any trouble?"

"They will if they can," was the answer.

They joined the pair in the brush behind Chun Ga's store a few minutes later. Clanton peered into the lawyer's face. "You, Slade?" he said with evident relief. "Waal, let's get this business over with."

He was only expressing the inner nervousness of them all. For ten minutes they talked in low tones, deciding just what was to be done, and how. It was Salter's intention

to keep himself out of sight as much as possible, and return to the hotel immediately the job was done.

"When we've got 'er, I s'pose we'll be headin' fer the pueblo, eh?" Clanton asked.

"That's the last place in the world you're heading," Slade said promptly. And to Slaughter: "Tip, you know this country better than the rest. How far is it to that old Mormon fort on Furnace Creek?"

"Mebbe eighty miles."

"Does Cache Tupper still run it?"

"Far's I know, he does."

Salters nodded. "Then that's where you're taking the Empress. Handle Cache anyway you have to, and stay there till I come. It may be three or four days."

Tip was still thinking hard. "What'll we be tellin' her 'bout all this?" he inquired.

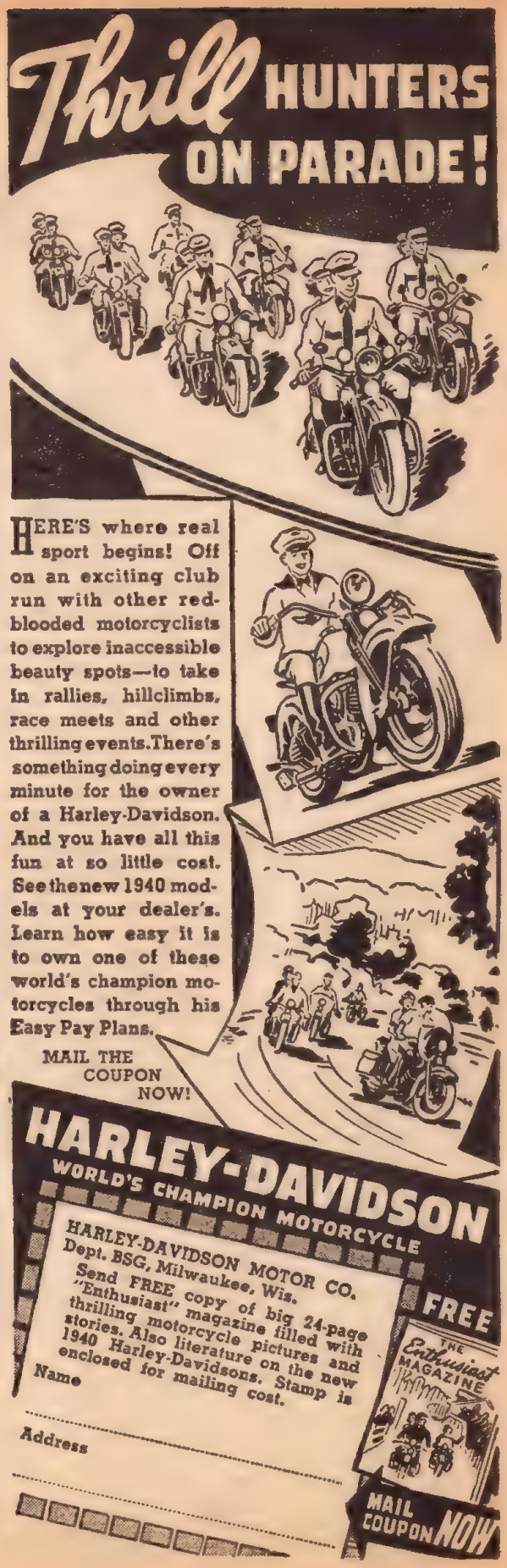
"Tell her nothing," was the flat answer. "I'll do the talking when I get there."

But Slaughter was not entirely satisfied. "Slade, we're goin' up against a tough crowd in these chinks, snatchin' their woman this way. If they get wise, we won't stand a chance!"

But Salters seemed to find no alarm in the prospect. "Leave it to me," he said. "I'll take care of that. I'll be going out by stage tomorrow morning," he went on, "and I'll get off at Mesquite Springs, pick up a pony, and head for Horse-thief Valley. Bronc Yeager owes me his neck, and he won't forget it. He'll throw in with us. That ought to make you boys feel better about bucking the pigtails, if that's bothering you so much. I'll have to promise Bronc a cut, but it won't be much. When I get to Furnace Creek, he and his crowd will be with me."

"With them to help, we ought to be able to handle anythin' that comes up," Clanton nodded approval.

Salters nodded. "We'd better.



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CHAPTER VII

THE LAW STEPS IN

THE sun was just lifting above the horizon, fiery red with the promise of coming heat, when Jim Morningstar headed for Chun Ga's store the following morning.

The place was closed and silent. But Jim was not surprised; it was natural at this hour. Passing through a vacant lot, he made for the rear of the building. Here, too, the shades were drawn and there was no sign of life. Only when his brisk knock failed to bring any response did he take alarm. He knocked again, louder. Still there was no answer.

Lips tightened to a grim line, he ran his eye over the building, then tried the door handle. To his surprise, it turned easily. Shoving the door open, he stepped in. "Chun Ga!" he called. "Carlotta! Are you here?"

Only silence answered him.

He tried the first hall door he came to, and found that it gave upon the room in which he had met Carlotta the day before. It was empty now. He didn't bother to look around. Next he tried a bedroom. It showed signs of recent occupancy, though it was tenantless now; the faint traces of a familiar perfume told him Carlotta had used this room. Certain he had been duped, he flung into the hall and tried the remaining door. It resisted momentarily, then sprang open with a jerk.

Jim halted on the threshold. This time his search was rewarded. There could be no mistaking that stout bulk lying on the tousled bed. It was Chun Ga. But as Jim stared, he divined that something was wrong. The next moment he made

sure. Stripping back the single blanket, he saw that the grocer was not asleep, but bound and gagged!

It was the work of only a moment to strip off the gag and start working on the Oriental's bonds. Chun Ga grunted and rolled his eyes. Seeing him conscious, Jim flung hasty words at him: "What happened, Chun Ga? Where's Carlotta?"

There was a maddeningly deliberate pause. "She gone," Chun Ga answered at last. "Last night, evelything all light. Moy Quai happy. I go bed, go sleep. White mens come, hit Chun Ga, knock out of bed, tie up. Take missy."

"White men, you say?" Jim questioned harshly. "Did you recognize any of them?" And at Chun Ga's headshake: "How many of them were there, then?"

Again that fatalistic shrug. "Mebbe thlee, fo'."

While Jim went on with his questions, his mind was already busy with what he had learned. Chun Ga either couldn't, or wouldn't, add anything material to it; but his reticence mattered little. The image of one man loomed large in Jim's suspicions now, and that man was Slade Salters.

Jim remembered back to the night of the dinner in Carlotta's apartment in Reno. Even then he had felt the wire-thin thread of tension and antagonism between the girl and her attorney. It had all started over Clay Masters' remarks about the possibility of an unrecorded gold mine somewhere in the desert. Then Salters had come down here to Piute, without even guessing that Carlotta was here also.

"What a fool I was to tell him!" he muttered. "I wanted to draw him out, but it wasn't worth this."

Swinging into the saddle, he kicked his bronc into motion and started for the hotel, where he had last seen Salters. Before he was halfway there, a voice hailed him and he whirled to see Bill Merriam.

"I thought you were well on your way by now, Morningstar," the scientist exclaimed.

Jim jerked a curt negative. "My plans have been knocked higher than a kite!" he flung over his shoulder as he hurried on to the hotel. "Tell you later!"

Merriam's jaw dropped. "Well, I'll be damned!" he cried, following the other man on the run.

AS for Jim, he was asking himself if he would find Salters in Piute this morning, or whether the attorney had already slipped away. In the latter event, it would clinch the matter of Slade's guilt, but wouldn't be much help otherwise. In fact, it would only further complicate affairs already too involved.

To his surprise, when he drew in his bronc before the hotel and glanced through the window, he saw Salters serenely eating his breakfast in the dining room. Swinging to the ground, Jim made for the door, and, a moment later, stood at the lawyer's table.

Slade glanced up with pretended surprise. "Why, good morning—" he began. Jim cut him off with a flat challenge that made Bill Merriam, standing behind him in the doorway, start with amazement.

"Salters, what have you done with Carlotta Soong?"

Salters started to rise from his chair, his expression altering. Then he sank back. "Done with Miss Soong?" he echoed. "I don't know what you mean. What's happened to her?"

"She's disappeared," Jim said shortly. "I think you know plenty about it!"

Something deadly flickered for an instant in Slade's dark eyes. Then he laughed. "Why, this is preposterous!" he exclaimed. "If anything has happened to her, I know nothing of it. Why should I? I've been her lawyer for years, Morningstar." He grew thoughtful. "I'll admit I don't know too much about this Wu-tai-shan Company—her Chinese firm. Perhaps they spirited her away." He refused to grow excited, lifting an inquiring glance. "What do you think happened?"

He sounded so plausible that Jim hesitated. Had he leaped to too hasty a conclusion? He recalled Carlotta's saying that where the policy of the Chinese was concerned, hers was not the only word. Yet she had promised to lead him to Jennifer. Had her people taken decisive steps to prevent her? He had only Chun Ga's word that white men had carried her off.

"I'm not thinking about this, Salters, I know," was Jim's slow answer.

Salters brushed this aside, insisting on an account of what had happened. Jim gave it to him. Salters seemed to weigh the story, his eyes darting absently. Suddenly he said:

"It's a strange business, I'll grant. But why were *you* down to that chink store so early in the morning? Did Miss Soong by any chance offer to take you to Miss Orme?"

The shrewdness of it brought Jim up short. Salters had apparently learned the details about Jennifer's disappearance from Dr. Birdsall and the others. Plainly he had put two and two together as to what had become of her.

"If her people objected, why should Carlotta offer to help me?" There was a deliberate evasion in Jim's query. It was almost as though he, and not Salters, were on the defensive. And yet his suspicions of this man were by no means allayed.

"I'm waiting to hear what you propose to do about this," he continued. "You've been her attorney for a long time. You might be expected to show a little concern over her disappearance."

Slade pretended indignation, but managed a laugh. "I told you I've finished my work here. I'm taking the stage this morning for Sodaville and going on from there to Reno. Of course, I'll help the authorities anyway I can," he concluded.

Morningstar stared him to silence. "Salters, if this was all I knew about you it would be enough to give me your number. You're a first-class rat. I'll prove that to you one of these days." With a shrug of contempt, he turned on his heel and walked out.

Merriam joined him in the lobby and they stepped out to the hotel veranda. It was Bill who spoke first. "This can't go on, Morningstar!" he burst out forcefully. "I've got to know that something is being done about Miss Orme. I'm going to the sheriff the minute he returns and demand immediate action!"

Jim rolled and lit a smoke before he answered. "I can hardly ask you to do otherwise now. Meanwhile, I'll watch every move Salters makes."

"But if he's going to Reno—" Merriam started to argue.

"He *says* he's going there," Jim interposed. "I think he's lying, so I'm going to do a little checking up on him. Come along. We'll go hunt up the boys."

SULPHUR, Johnnie and Hap were not at the livery, but were found in a saloon nearby. Jim called the lanky Irishman aside.

"Sulphur, didn't you tell me you knew the driver of the Sodaville stage?" he asked.

"Sep Williams? Waal, I should smile," Sulphur responded, without a trace of expression crossing his face. "What's that old juniper been doin' now?"

Jim lost no time in acquainting him with what was wanted. "I'll see to it," Sulphur promised, taking the money Morningstar handed him. A moment later he went off in search of Williams.

He was back in less than twenty minutes. "It's O. K.," he assured Jim. "I gave Sep the money, an' he says he'll send a messenger back right off if Salters leaves the stage this side of Sodaville. If he don't, Williams promises he'll make sure Slade gits on the train fer Reno, an' let yuh know accordin'."

"Good." Jim was more than satisfied. He turned to Merriam. "If you've got any good-bys to say to your friends, you'd better say them quick, if you're going to string along with me this morning." He instructed Sulphur to get Johnnie and Happy Failes and bring them to Chun Ga's store at once.

Merriam accompanied Jim up the street. They could see the stage standing before the hotel. It was getting ready to leave. Dr. Birdsall and the others were aboard, their belongings piled about them. Merriam said good-by to them.

"I hope you'll find Miss Orme speedily, Morningstar," Dr. Birdsall called down soberly. "Let me know the minute you learn anything. I'll be waiting anxiously for news."

Jim nodded. There was no point in mentioning Carlotta. Slade Salters sat in a corner of the stage, roll-

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ing a cigar over in his lips. The look he gave Morningstar was one of faint amusement.

Sep Williams, a grizzled, salty old-timer, climbed to the box and picked up the reins. The stage horses knew all the signs. Even as Sep reached for his long blacksnake, they started up. With a rattle of wheels, the stage started on the long, dusty trip across the desert to Sodaville.

Jim was standing there, thinking of Salter's smooth inscrutability, when through the dust rode a black-bearded, heavyset man on a bay gelding. Jim recognized Huck Mulhall.

The sheriff had already spotted him, for he came forward directly and stepped to the ground at once. "I want to talk to yuh, Morningstar," he said.

"What about?" Jim countered, not attempting to hide his surprise.

"Dave Brant stopped me as I rode past his place half an hour ago," Mulhall explained. "He had an excited chink there, a friend of his cook. It was Chun Ga, who runs a little grocery here. I managed to get out of him that a girl was abducted from his place last night. It seems you visited her yesterday. What do yuh know about this?"

"I don't know a thing, Mulhall, beyond what Chun Ga told me," Jim answered.

"Well!" the lawman grunted. "That don't sound right. If yo're goin' to take that slant, I'll have to hold yuh—"

"You don't mean you're arresting me?" Morningstar questioned, alarmed only at the threat of being delayed.

"That's as good a name fer it as any," the sheriff said unemotionally.

"But you can't do that!" Merriam protested angrily. "I'll tell you why he saw Miss Soong. She was going to help us find Jennifer Orme."

Jim shook his head and prepared himself for what was to follow.

"Jest who is *she?*" the sheriff demanded suspiciously.

There was nothing to be done but explain. Mulhall's face reddened as he listened, and at the end he exploded with a fine show of indignation.

"Why wasn't my office notified about this?" he demanded. "Believe me, I'm holdin' the both of yuh now!"

CHAPTER VIII

DEEP IN THE DESERT

JIM found time for sober reflection as he and Bill Merriam accompanied Mulhall toward the latter's office in the jail. Both Jennifer and Carlotta he knew to be in real danger; either might be dead. As for Carlotta, if emissaries of her own people had her, she would be in even graver peril than if some of Slade Salters' thugs had abducted her.

He had not forgotten his promise to the girl that he would keep the law out of this. But he felt that events had changed that now. If there was any help to be got from the sheriff, he ought to enlist it for Carlotta's own good.

When they stepped into Mulhall's office, Jim had made up his mind defintely. "You needn't bother to lock us up, sheriff," he said as the latter turned to him. "I'm as anxious to get this business ironed out as you are."

"That's better," was the gruff response. "Yuh just give me the whole story, Morningstar."

That was precisely what Jim did, starting with the Feast of the Lanterns dinner in Reno, when he had first met Carlotta, and continuing on through all that had happened to

the Flagler expedition at Pueblo Grande. He explained how Carlotta's sudden disappearance aroused his suspicions of Slade Salters. Nor did he omit his arragements through Sep Williams, the stage driver, for keeping a watch on the attorney. Mulhall listened to it all attentively, tugging at his beard. At the end he nodded.

"I didn't think yuh could tell a story I'd be willin' to believe," he said frankly. "But yuh have. An' since yuh put all yore cards on the table, I'm willin' to help yuh. I want to see both of those girls back, safe an' unharmed. But I reckon yo're right 'bout the best way of goin' at it, Morningstar. If we can find Carlotta Soong, locatin' Miss Orme'll be considerably simplified and—"

He broke off, frowning, as three men stepped in the door in ominous quiet, and without so much as a by-your-leave. Jim glanced up. It was Sulphur Riley and his companions.

"What's the meanin' of this, sheriff?" Sulphur drawled with dangerous calm. "Don't tell me yo're holdin' my friend, Jim, here—"

"It's all right, Sulphur," the latter broke in, with a grin. "I've told Mulhall everything. We're pulling together the rest of the way." He saw the expressions of relief which washed over the punchers' faces at his words, and knew the lengths to which they would have gone without question, had it been necessary to extricate him from some difficulty.

Mulhall scrutinized the three men individually and thoroughly, as though sizing them up. What he saw must have satisfied him. "Yo're workin' for Mornin'star, ain't yuh?" he queried. "Better get ready to ride, because we're headin' out right away."

"Waal, climb onto yore bronc, then, an' we'll go," was Sulphur's way of telling him there would be

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no delay on his account. Mulhall grunted and scraped to his feet.

"Got to get me some deputies an' swear 'em in," he said to Jim. "It won't take me fifteen minutes, if I can locate the men I want."

HE was as good as his word, appearing well within the allotted time with four mounted and capable-looking men. Meanwhile Jim, Merriam and the others had moved down to Chun Ga's grocery. They were covering the ground in the rear with great care when the sheriff arrived.

"Find anythin'?" he demanded.

"Some broncs were held over here in the dry wash," Jim explained. "It's pretty plain from the boot tracks that their riders were interested in the store. The yard's beaten too hard to learn anything there. It's my guess that Miss Soong went whichever way those ponies were headed."

Mulhall went over the ground and nodded. "Morningstar, I'll swear you an' yore friends in, before we get started—"

"Wait a second," Jim interrupted. "One of us has got to remain here in town, in case a message comes from Sep Williams." He turned to Bill Merriam. "I don't like to do this, Merriam, but somebody's got to stay behind."

Bill wanted to protest, but he saw the sense of it. "If I'm staying, don't waste time talking about it!" He grinned then, to show he had no hard feeling at being left in Piute.

There was some talk of how he was going to find them in case of need. That settled, they swung into the saddle.

Barren hills rose to the north of Piute. The trail followed by the posse threaded these hills interminably. Mulhall, who knew this country well, squinted ahead from time

to time. Plainly there was something on his mind.

"They're makin' fer lava country up here a piece," he said at last. "Reckon we'll have trouble there." He did not say that they stood an excellent chance of losing the abductors altogether, but the possibility hung in the air after he had ceased speaking.

He was not mistaken in his estimation of the situation. An hour later the sign of the horses they pursued faded out in the volcanic rubble. Fifty yards, and there was not even the faint scratch of a shod hoof to help them.

Sulphur was the best tracker in the posse. He went over the ground with unwearied patience. It was half an hour before he found any sign, and then it was only a broken stalk of fire weed. It was enough for him. Given the direction, he ranged far out and presently hailed the others forward with the information that he had picked up the trail again.

Now the going was slower. Evening found them in a barren, desolate country of broken ledges. Sheriff Mulhall studied the sun. "We'll make dry camp here," he decided. "There's no tank within half a day's ride of us, an' I'd hate to shove a bronc over this stuff in the dark. He'd bust a leg before yuh covered a mile!"

In the first light of morning, they were on their way once more. They found the trail more difficult to hold than on the previous day. Time after time, the tracks were lost, and precious hours were wasted in finding them. In this rocky, utterly treeless inferno, the power and weight of the desert made itself felt. For the first time, Jim began to wonder whether they would succeed in overtaking Carlotta's captors.

They had made sure of an unmistakable trail behind themselves, and so it was no surprise when Bill Merriam caught up with them late in the afternoon. As Jim had anticipated, Sep Williams' messenger had reached Piute with word of Slade Salters' movements.

"Salters got off the stage at Mesquite Springs and headed north into the desert," Bill announced. Morningstar and Mulhall exchanged glances at the information. The former nodded.

"So I was right," he said tersely. "I don't know where Salters himself is heading, but it's plain enough that some of his renegades have got Carlotta! He certainly engineered this business!"

SUNSET found them even deeper in the forbidding desolation of the great Amargosa Desert. The trail of the abducted girl had taken them miles from the Indian pueblo whose secret Salters evidently planned to drag from her. Neither Morningstar nor Mulhall was surprised at that.

"He knows that might be the first place we would look for Carlotta," Jim said. "He's taking her away somewhere till things quiet down. The question is"—his brows knit thoughtfully—"where?"

There was no sure answer. They could only push on, hoping that time would diminish the precautions of the men they were seeking. But as Johnnie Landers pointed out, something had to break mighty soon. Their water was almost gone, likewise their food.

"Waal, Coffin Spring should only be a mile or so away," Mulhall announced. "I've always found water there. That'll carry us over tomorrow."

But when they located Coffin Spring, just as the afterglow was fading from the lavender-tinted sky, they found, to their chagrin, that it was dry. Mulhall said there was no other water that he knew of within thirty or forty miles.

It was a sober bunch of men who camped beside the dry spring that night. Such water as they had was used sparingly; and even so, the morrow promised early difficulties. In the morning, their first move was to consider the situation.

"Salters' men must have known what they were up against, and prepared themselves to meet it," Jim said. "But that doesn't help us. Just where do we look for water from here, Mulhall?"

"Waal, there's Iron Tanks, thirty miles or so west of here," was the answer. "The water there's rank stuff—if there is any. An' then there's Skull River, but that's nothin' but a pothole. That's as far or farther to the northeast." Mulhall shook his head. "I dunno which I'd say was the surest bet."

"We've got to have water," Jim said soberly. "The best thing is to divide our forces and make sure of it. We can arrange to meet somewhere by evening. At least one party is almost certain to find water."

It was so decided. A rendezvous was named for that night and they set out, Mulhall taking his deputies with him; Merriam, Sulphur, Happy, and Johnnie Landers going with Jim.

It was to Iron Tanks that the latter had elected to go. Mulhall's directions had been so hazy that considerable difficulty was experienced in locating the place; and then only to find it dry, as Coffin Spring had been. There was no time to hunt for some unknown tank. They had all they could do for that day to reach the designated rendezvous. There, to Jim's chagrin, he found that Mulhall had been no more successful than himself in finding water.

"We've either got to find water in a hurry, or turn back," Jim declared grimly. "It may already be too late for us to reach Piute. Where's the nearest certain water from here, Mulhall?" He found it hard to keep a sharp impatience out of his tone, for the sheriff's "information," well meaning though it might be, had already been the cause of their losing an entire day.

"Waal, there's nothin' sure this side of Furnace Creek. Mebbe one day's ride, an' mebbe two—"

"What do you mean?" Jim demanded.

"There's always water in the creek," was the answer, "but no tellin' how far down it's flowin' this time o' year. There may be plenty in the low spots as far east as the Vermilion Buttes, or we may have to ride clear to the headwaters, around Tupper's old Mormon fort."

They talked it over. It was decided to split once more in the morning, with plans to meet at evening of the second day somewhere near the head of Furnace Creek.

They started at three in the morning, to take advantage of the dawn coolness; and yet, it proved to be the hardest day Jim had ever put in on the desert. Nothing but the white glare of sand, the red of crumbling ledges met them. A scorching wind whipped up at noon, to strengthen into a sandstorm. The horses had grown so weak that it was often necessary to dismount and lead them. Catching Jim's eye, Sulphur, hardened old campaigner that he was, shook his head grimly.

"We can't stand much more o' this," he declared.

BY midafternoon they reached what was clearly the bed of Furnace Creek. It was dry. No digging in the sand brought the slightest trace of moisture to light. Yet Jim was visibly cheered.

"All we've got to do is follow the creek up," he told the others. "We can't miss it!"

But close of day found them as far from relief as ever. Johnnie and Happy Failes were for pushing on steadily, but Jim said no. "We'll stop for a rest," he declared. "We're only a few hours from water. We're all right now. Sometime tomorrow we'll go back and pick up the trail."

His tone conveyed a confidence he did not feel, for it would have been impossible to overlook the fact that time was passing, putting a wider gap between them and Carlotta. One aspect of the case persisted in his mind. At last he voiced it.

"If this country is tough on us, it's just as tough on the men we're hunting. As for a woman—she couldn't stand it. And that bunch is going to be careful of that girl. I believe they've long since reached the place they were heading for, some place where food and water are sure."

"What about the Mormon fort that Mulhall was talking about?" Merriam asked. "It's a chance."

"They *could* be holed up there!" Jim exclaimed. And then, with growing conviction: "Where could they find a better place? Boys!" he cried, "when we get our canteens full, we're going to the Mormon fort!"

Night was falling when, without warning, there was a rattle of hoofs. A number of riders drew near in the soft darkness. At first Jim thought it was Mulhall and his deputies returning. He stood up. But it was not Mulhall, as he learned when the newcomers closed in in such a manner as to suggest a capture. A mo-

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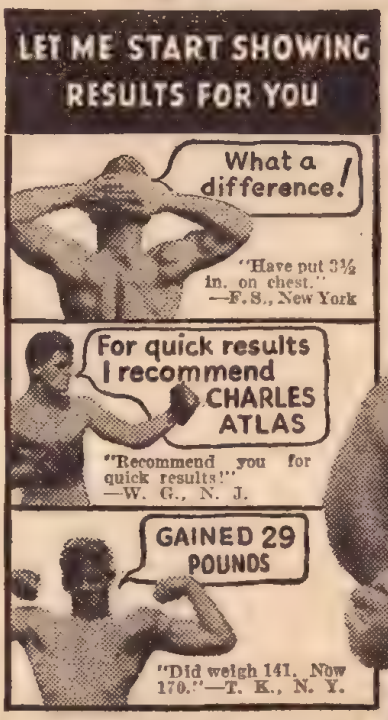

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ment later the leader swung down and approached the fire. Jim stared. He was a powerful Chinaman. He had a gun in his hands.

"Hello, what's this?" Jim exclaimed, with a heartiness he was far from feeling.

The Oriental, fiercer of visage than ever, did not deign to answer. He glanced about, taking everything in. "I am Quan Goon," he announced arrogantly, as though certain he was known. "Where is Moy Quai? Miss Soong," he added for Morningstar's benefit. There was no trace of pidgin in his speech.

"I don't know. That's what we're trying to find out. That's why we're here."

Quan Goon absorbed the statement stolidly. Plainly, he was not inclined to believe it. Jim shot a warning glance at Sulphur, who had started to get to his feet, bristling and incensed at the look of things. Sulphur subsided grudgingly.

"We think you took Moy Quai," Quan Goon said stubbornly. "What have you done with her?"

Jim shook his head. "You've got it all wrong. Carlotta was kidnaped, all right, but not by me. Maybe this will convince you." He held out the little jade dragon Carlotta gave him.

Quan Goon stared his surprise.

"She gave you this?"

Morningstar nodded.

"As a matter of fact," he proceeded to press his advantage, "I'm practically certain that Salters, her lawyer, is responsible for her disappearance." He told why he thought so, and how he had made sure of Slade Salters' connection with what had happened.

Quan Goon heard him out, and then growled: "Where will you look for Moy Quai?"

Jim told him about the Mormon fort, far up Furnace Creek.

Quan Goon squared his powerful

shoulders. "We'll go there now."

"But what about the sheriff?" Jim protested. "We were supposed to meet his party. They need water, too, desperately. We can't forget about them!"

The Oriental jerked himself erect, suspicion and rage in his face. "Didn't you promise Moy Quai to say no word to the sheriff?"

Jim explained how Mulhall had learned of Carlotta's disappearance and had promptly declared himself in on the search. Quan Goon scowled. Clearly he wanted nothing to do with the law.

Morningstar briefly considered the horsemen who ringed them in. He exchanged a glance with Merriam. He was not deceiving himself about these Chinese. He knew he was not dealing with the humble Chinaman of the laundry-counter type. These men were lean, hard fighting men, as much at home on a horse as an Apache would be, and likely to be as ruthless if opposed.

"The sheriff will have to take care of himself," Quan Goon announced shortly. "We have water and food. You will ride with us."

"That suits me," Jim told him. "Pick up your saddles, boys," he said to Sulphur and the others.

"Wait!" Quan Goon broke in. "Put your guns on the ground before you go near the horses."

"What?" Jim demanded furiously. "Are we prisoners?"

"Hostages," Quan Goon answered arrogantly. "No harm will come to you if we find Moy Quai."

CHAPTER IX

THE WOLVES' DEN

FOR upward of twenty years the backwaters of pioneer life had swirled about the old Mormon fort on Furnace Creek. It had seen Indian fights savage as the bleak desert in which it stood; succored settlers on their way across the Sierras to California; become a last outpost of the strange religious sect which had taken root in Utah. It still bore the marks of those times.

Of late years the fort had been little more than a trading post, presided over by grizzled old Cache Tupper. But, with its stout adobe stockade and its fortificationlike buildings, it still remained well nigh impregnable, when it was sufficiently manned. Due to these things, as well as its extreme isolation, Mormon fort had more than once been pressed into service as an outlaw rendezvous and hide-out.

Certainly it had a forbidding aspect under the cold, dead light of a late moon as Slade Salters emerged from the trade room and looked about. Cache Tupper was with him; a twisted, sly, evil-looking old man with an oily manner. In the compound Tupper halted and jabbed an insinuating thumb in the direction of a small building standing by itself in one corner of the stockade inclosure.

"Over there," he said. "That's where they put 'er."

Without replying, Salters went on toward the building, his tall, straight figure cutting its shadow pattern on the ground. He halted before the stout plank door and rapped smartly. After a moment the door was opened guardedly from within. Bart Cagle's suspicious visage appeared.

"Howdy, Slade," he nodded with obvious relief. "Yuh got here finally, eh? Heard you an' Bronc's crowd ride in."

Salters' nod was curt. "I understand you've got the girl here. You can leave us for a while," he said sharply. "I want to be alone with her."

There was an evil suggestion in the glint of Cagle's eyes as he grinned acknowledgment. But all he said was, "O. K., Slade."

Salters watched till he was sure Cagle was on his way to join the others, where they were drinking together in the main building of the post. Then he stepped inside and closed the door. A crude oil lamp was burning within. In its glow Salters made out Carlotta, sitting upright in a chair, her hands bound behind its back. There was a fiery flash in her eyes as she met his regard, and he lost no time in trying to placate her.

"What, tied up?" he exclaimed with concern. "They dared do that to you? By—"

"Never mind all that," she cut him off coldly. "You needn't pretend anything, Slade. It was you who did this to me!"

For a moment he stood looking down on her, thinking how beautiful she was in anger, even in these sordid surroundings. Then he nodded slowly, moving around behind her chair to release her hands.

"That's right," he confessed as he worked. "And I gave those fools strict orders to be gentle with you! If they think they can handle you this way and get away with it, I'll soon teach them different!" His tone suggested quite convincingly that his own indignation was bubbling just beneath the surface.

"But why?" she insisted, forcing all fury and loathing and suspicion out of her voice. "Why did you have to do anything to me?"

"For your own good, Carlotta," he assured her gravely as he got the last bond loosened and she got up from the chair to chafe her bruised wrists tenderly. "You had to be brought to your senses in some way. Don't you understand," he went on with the air of a displeased mentor, "that you can't go on doing such things as killing men, and keeping Miss Orme prisoner and the like, without serious consequences? I've been your attorney for a long time. I don't propose to wait until you land yourself in a position where I'll be utterly unable to help you. It must be growing clearer and clearer even to yourself that you've kept me in the dark too long about what's going on. Don't you realize that the Wu-tai-shan Company cares nothing about you as an individual. It's only their own interests that concern them, and so long as you are obedient, they will ask things of you which should never be asked of anyone—"

HE was watching her eyes, and stopped when he saw the warning signal there. But he went on almost at once: "However, that's all in the past now. But I insist that you simply haven't sufficient confidence in the man in whom you should have every confidence. If you had only told me long ago what these mysterious maneuvers are about, you would not be here now."

He paused on a flat note of waiting, as though he had delivered an ultimatum. Plainly he expected her to speak. But Carlotta only went on moving up and down to restore the circulation in cramped limbs, and glancing thoughtfully first at Salters' face, and then at the oil lamp. When she spoke at last, it was almost with composure.

"I'm sorry if I appear that way to you, Slade. But I can tell you nothing more than you already know."

"I see." He looked serious, pursing his lips in sober thought. She listened quietly while he went on, marshaling his reasons why she could not afford silence any longer.

For a quarter of an hour she remained so unmoved that at last he burst our harshly:

"Carlotta, there's something in the rimrock above Pueblo Grande which is making you all do these desperate and foolhardy things! You must either take me there, or tell me about it! Don't you see that you are endangering yourself needlessly by this absurd mystery? Good heavens, you don't think I'm interested in whatever it is that's up there, do you?" He put all the appeal of which he was capable into the words.

Carlotta faced him calmly.

"I'm sorry," she repeated in a tone of unshaken resolution. "I can't take you anywhere, or tell you anything. There's no use of your asking again."

Standing there, staring at her, Salters seemed to undergo a profound change. He hardened, ruthlessness and cruel purpose naked on his face.

"You're making a mistake, Empress," he said thinly, throwing in her face the sardonic epithet by which she was known. "A big one! All your wriggling and squirming on the pin only proves that there's a mighty big stake behind this game. Well"—a hard grin wreathed his lips—"I'll find out yet what it is. In fact,

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I'm pretty certain I already know! And you'll confirm me, before we get through." He looked at her grimly.

"You've already confirmed my own opinion of you," she flashed, giving him a look of hatred. "I thought you were trying to worm something out of me for your own purpose. I'm only a woman, you were thinking; it should be easy to twist me around your finger, get what you want. Well, you won't find it as easy as you supposed, Slade." She had perfect command of herself now.

Temper boiled up in Salters, and a vein in his temple throbbed. He would have retorted fiercely, even laid hands on her in the heat of his frustration; but at the moment someone banged on the door and called out urgently.

"What is it?" Salters demanded savagely.

"It's Snap!" cried the man outside. "Open up, Slade! There's trouble brewin'!"

Salters had the door open almost before Clanton had ceased speaking. "All right, what is it?" he demanded.

"Me an' one of Bronc's boys was takin' a little pasear around the hills, when we was fired on." The words tumbled from Clanton's lips. "It was Huck Mulhall, the sheriff! There was four or five men with him! We give 'em the slip, but they're comin'! They'll be here in half an hour—mebbe less!"

Salters pulled himself together swiftly, seeming to forget Carlotta's existence.

"Mulhall, eh?" he muttered. "We'll take care of that in a hurry!" He whirled on Snap. "Tell the boys to get ready to ride, and send Cagle over here again. We've got to leave somebody on guard while we're gone!"

Snap started away running. Almost before he was beyond earshot,

Salters wheeled toward Carlotta. "Sit down in that chair!" he ordered harshly. "I'm tying you up again whether you like it or not!"

Carlotta caught back the stinging retort which trembled on her tongue. There could be no point in taunting Salters while he was in this mood.

When Bart Cagle made his appearance, the girl was once more securely bound. "Keep an eye on her," Salters directed the renegade sharply. "I don't want you to stir a step away from here while the rest of us are gone!"

"O. K., Slade," the other agreed.

STEPPING outside, Salters waited only long enough to hear the bar dropped in place, inside the door. Then he hastened toward the post building. Men were busy there, tossing saddles aboard their ponies, cinching up. Bronc Yeager, a rugged, granite-faced man with the stamp of the confirmed owl-hooter on him, was waiting with the bridle of Slade's horse in his grasp.

"Let's get goin'," he growled. "I got an account to settle with Mulhall anyway. Out here in the middle of hell is a good place to do it!"

Snap Clanton took the lead as they poured out of the stockade gate. "Mulhall's follerin' the ridge along the creek," he declared. "That's where we'll meet 'em."

They turned down the creek bed, dry at this point, and soon were putting the ponies up the rocky ridge which Clanton had indicated. Scarcely had they reached its crest, half a mile from the fort, when a warning cry rang out, and a moment later a rifle blazed at them from the cover of the rocks.

Salters turned in the saddle. "They're holed up, over there in the rocks!" he whipped out. He sent a shot in that direction. But it was Bronc Yeager who took command, accustomed as he was to skirmishing of this kind. Under his direction, Salters' men and his own owl-hoots spread out and drew a net about the patch of rocks from which the enemy's fire came. It swelled in volume as the issue at stake became plain, for Mulhall and his men were in desperate case. Outnumbered and suffering from lack of water, and even of food, they found no choice but to go on the defensive when they found themselves pitted against this overwhelmingly superior force.

A mile distant, on the way up Furnace Creek, Jim Morningstar and the others heard the heavy firing. Quan Goon and the other Chinese cocked wary ears toward the ridge from whence the sound came, but showed no inclination to investigate.

"I told you what the situation was —and I was right!" Jim exclaimed to the leader. "Mulhall has clashed with Salters' outfit! We ought to get over there and give him a hand!"

Sulphur and the cowboys saw it the same way. But for once they hesitated, looking to their captors. Quan Goon listened intently for a moment, and then shook his head.

"We must find Moy Quai," he announced inflexibly. A wild cry from him swept them on.

Jim was anxious to do what he could to relieve Mulhall—and it was plain from the sound of the firing that the sheriff was outnumbered. But at the same time Jim was driven as strongly as Quan Goon to learn whether Mormon fort was the hiding place that had been chosen for Carlotta. In the hope that the girl might be located and freed without further loss of time, he anxiously hurried up the creek with the others.

"Better hand over our guns, Quan," he told the Oriental flatly. "We won't be much use to you without them."

Quan Goon stabbed him with a suspicious glance. "You shall have your guns," he assented. "But do not forget that every move you make will be watched!"

The waning moon was throwing long black shadows when they rode out on the little flat which accommodated the fort. There was no sign of life about the place. The gate was closed. They made straight for it; and it was Jim who hauled himself up out of the saddle by holding onto its top stakes. There was a flash and a bang from within, and a slug whistled past his head.

"Give me a hand here!" he flung at Sulphur.

Together they managed to reach the top of the gate. Jim dropped inside. Even as he was loosening the bars, Sulphur fired at someone among the buildings.

"Git out of here!" a harsh voice yelled. "Pull out, or I'll blast yuh down!" It was Cache Tupper. He held a rifle in his trembling hands, but it was plain the weapon was more of a bluff than anything, for his aim was poor.

Jim got the last bar out and shoved the gates wide. The punchers and Quan Goon's Chinese came through with a rush. If they had expected a sharp resistance, they were mistaken. Sulphur took a last snap shot at Tupper, who howled his terror and took to his heels, the rifle flying. Merriam grabbed it up.

DISMOUNTING then, the men quickly spread through the post in search of Carlotta. They left no spot unexplored. Jim was just com-

ing out of the trade room, when a shout from another part of the compound attracted his attention. He recognized Johnnie Landers' voice. In no time he was running that way.

Johnnie was plastered against the wall of a little outbuilding, just at one side of the door.

"What is it?" Jim demanded.

"Don't git in front of that door!" Landers warned. "Some hombre's in there with a gun, an' he's drillin' holes with it!"

It was enough for Jim. He thought he understood the situation. Carlotta had been found nowhere else. If she was at Mormon fort at all, then she was here. Evidently one of Salters' renegades had been left behind to stand guard.

"Have you tried that door?" he asked.

"No!" Johnnie jerked out. "An' if yuh ain't a dang fool, yuh won't do it neither."

Jim made for the door without a second's pause. The planks resisted his first kick, and his second. Bullets ripped through them, perilously close.

"Lend a hand here!" he panted as Sulphur came running up. Together they put their shoulders to the door and heaved. It gave suddenly, with the bursting of the bar. They were catapulted into the little room, almost losing their balance. It was all that saved them.

"Look out, Jim!" Morningstar heard Carlotta's frightened cry. "He'll kill you!"

Jim threw himself sidewise just as Cagle fired. The slug whined past his face. Bart attempted to shoot again. Before he could do so, Sulphur flung his six-gun. It caught the renegade alongside the head. With a groan, he stiffened and then slumped down, out when he struck the floor.

"Much obliged, Sulphur," Jim

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grunted. Even as he spoke, he was searching the room with his eyes. He saw Carlotta, bound in her chair. A single long step took him to her side.

"Are you hurt?" he exclaimed as he whipped out a knife and slashed her bonds.

"No, Jim," she answered with surprising calm. "But I think you came just in time—"

She broke off abruptly as her eyes fell on Quan Goon, who had just stepped in the door. The hard-faced Chinese fastened an accusing eye on her. Jim thought he saw the girl pale slightly.

With that one glimpse of Quan Goon, Carlotta seemed to understand that circumstances were different from what she had supposed.

"Moy Quai, we have come for you," the powerful Quan announced. He made it sound like a threat.

"Yes," she murmured submissively. "I am ready to go."

They were just emerging from the building when a hoarse shout was raised from the direction of the gate. It was Happy Failes.

"Golly, fellows, hustle!" he screeched. "Here comes Salters an' his whole damn gang! They'll wipe us out if they ketch us here! There must be a dozen of 'em!"

Jim sprang that way, less to confirm Happy's words than to estimate how much time they had in which to effect their escape. But it was already too late. Only a few hundred yards away, a grimly determined cavalcade was galloping up, rifles at the ready. At their head rode Slade Salters.

END OF PART II

What fate is in store for Carlotta? With the Chinese girl a prisoner, how can Jim carry on his search for Jennifer Orme? What will be the outcome of the fight between Slade Salters' crowd and the posse? Another installment of this unusual story appears in next week's issue—don't miss it!

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